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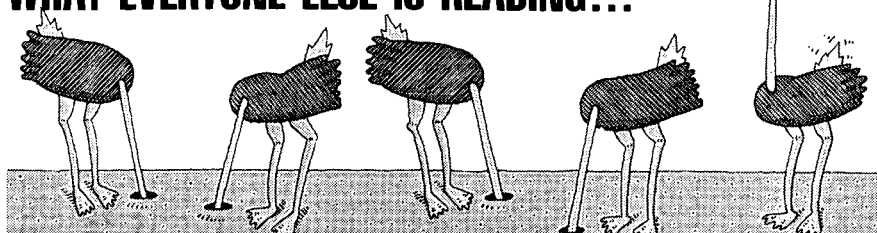
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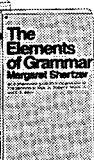
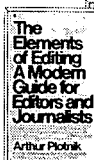
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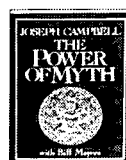
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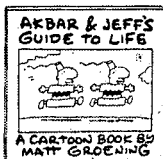
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# GUEST EDITORIAL

by Judy Downer

England is famous for its many associations with mystery fiction, but readers of AHMM visiting the British Isles this spring or summer might also enjoy a side trip to Ventnor, on the Isle of Wight, home of the Museum of the History of Smuggling.

For centuries England's rulers levied taxes on imports and exports such as tea (made infamous by the American Revolution), brandy, wine, soap, spices, and textiles. Add to that the Isle of Wight's location just off the southern coast in the English Channel, ideal for licit and illicit trade with various French ports, and you have motive and opportunity for a thriving trade in contraband.

The museum displays many artifacts connected with smuggling French brandy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ships with secret holds

carried casks of brandy by night to the island and dumped them offshore, where their contacts, often fishermen, retrieved them. There are bottomless wooden "peep tubs," used for peering beneath the water, grappling hooks for dragging the channel bottom, a "spout" lantern (resembling a watering can) for discreet signaling, kegs disguised as rocks, and a device for faking trails of hoofprints. My favorite exhibit, however, has nothing to do with brandy: a French-made elbow-length lady's silk glove, rolled up and hidden inside a walnut shell.

In these days of "drug wars," when much of what is smuggled is considered intrinsically dangerous, it seems quaint and a bit romantic that such innocent items should have been transported by stealth and smugglers pursued with such zeal by the Department of Revenue.

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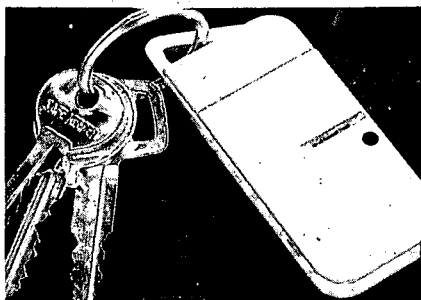
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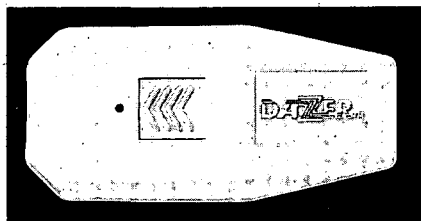


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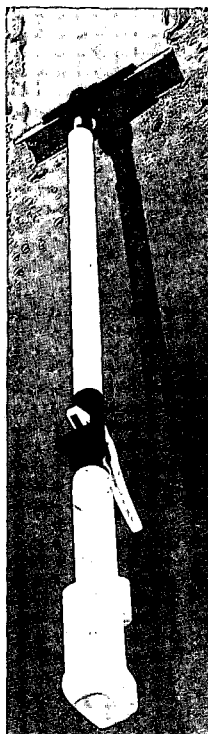


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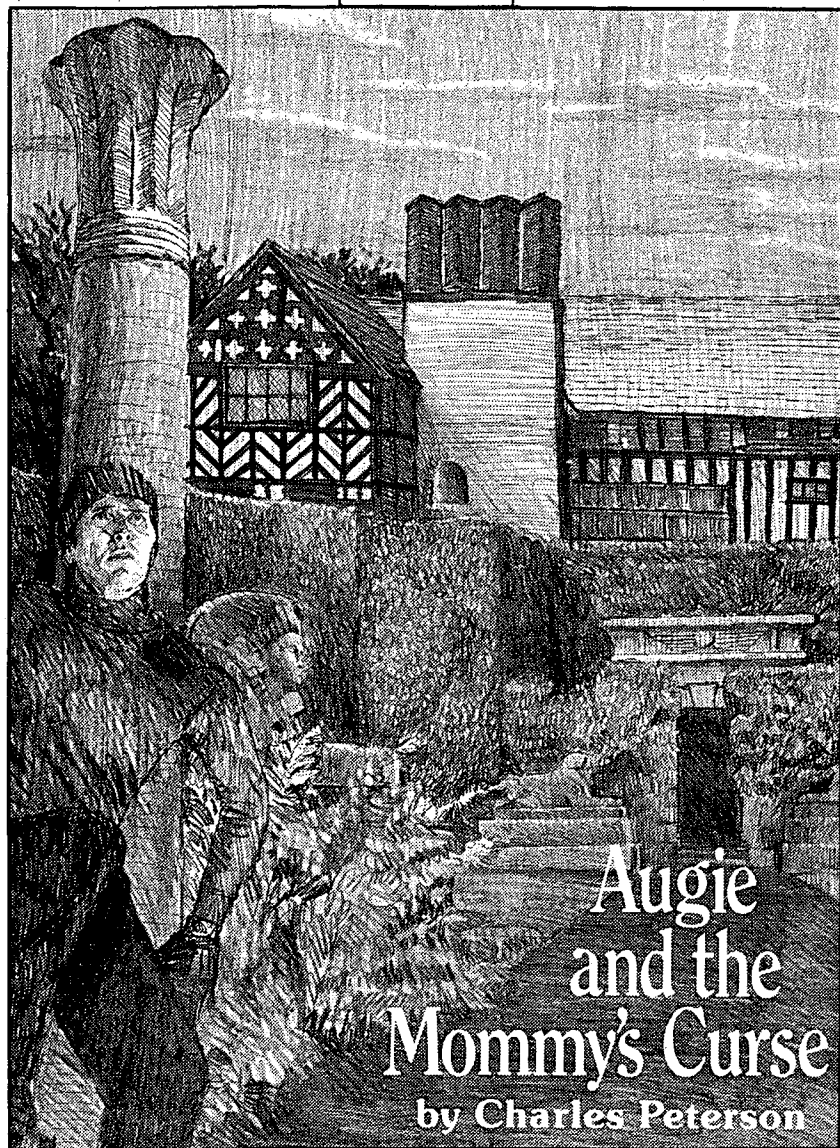
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FICTION



Augie  
and the  
Mommy's Curse  
by Charles Peterson

Illustration by Joel Spector

6

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**I**t is morning.

The sun is shining.

Although I haven't checked it out personally, I have the poet's word for it that the lark's on the wing and the snail's on the thorn and that as a result all's right with the world.

I am in the rearmost booth at Grandma Grady's Cafe, where Grandma himself is flipping my order of eggs over easy with bacon on the side in a morose sort of way, like a man who is wondering whether, in the last analysis, there isn't more to life than flipping eggs and if he shouldn't be moving on to flapjacks.

Then there is a darkness over the landscape as of a large cloud passing over the sun, and a large, opaque body sits down in the booth opposite me.

"Hi, Kit," says Police Sergeant "Bronco" Zeprowski.

"Augie," I correct him. "Augie Augenblick is the name these days."

"I know, I know. I keep forgetting after all those years of chasing you as Kit the Cat Burglar."

"Ah, yes, those were the fun days, weren't they? Followed by four to six years with time off for good behavior. Just a minute while I empty my pockets."

"What for?"

"To prove I'm not making off with Grandma Grady's spoons and salt shakers."

Sergeant Zeprowski waves a hamlike hand. "Nah," he says. "I know you are supposed to be gainfully employed as caretaker for Professor Huffelmeyer's estate. I have something else in mind. A little favor, you might say. Just coffee and danish," he adds to Grandma Grady, who at that moment deposits breakfast in front of me.

I prong a forkful of egg thoughtfully. "Such as?"

"There was kind of a to-do at Dr. Potterby's museum two nights ago," says Zeprowski, in what seems to be a fairly radical shift of subject.

"Is that the same Dr. Potterby who banks millions every year for making Potterby's Pink Pills for Pallid People?"

"That's him. He collects Egyptian stuff and has his own private museum for it. It is open only by appointment. So the other night the Lady Friends of the Natural History Museum were his guests—about fifty of 'em. And the next day Potterby phones us to say that the gem of his collection—a gold scarab from the Middle

Kingdom (whatever that is)—is missing. About ten grand's worth, he claims. He was more than somewhat upset. And because he is a friend of the commissioner, the commissioner is now upset." Zeprowski lapses into a reminiscent mood, wincing. "And so on. Well, the Ladies are so above reproach that we assumed somebody else got in there after the tour and lifted the thing. We picked up Lefty and Hefty—"

I choked on a piece of toast. "Those two? They're strictly smash-and-grab types."

"You know them?"

"Not intimately, thank goodness. But once upon a time they were planning to do their thing on a certain jewelry store. They got to arguing over who was going to do the smash and who was going to do the grab, and while they were yakking, somebody else, who had sneaked in through a rear upper window, cleaned out the stuff. Lefty and Hefty were, like your commissioner, upset."

Zeprowski gives me a speculative look. "That somebody wouldn't happen to be Kit the Cat Burglar, would it?"

"My lips are sealed. At least until the statute of limitations expires. So what did Lefty and Hefty have to say?"

"Unfortunately, they had a pretty good alibi. They were both in the slammer on suspicion of another job and weren't released until yesterday."

"Well, if you're thinking of nailing me for this caper, I was over in Central City with Professor Huffelmeyer and his daughter Angela, helping them set up a display of his African artifacts."

"I know. I checked already—just as a matter of routine."

There is a curious quality in Zeprowski's voice, and I give him a sharp look. He always reminds me of some kind of bear—of the grizzly ilk, say—and right now he looks embarrassed, like a bear caught using the wrong salad fork.

"Does this have something to do with that favor you mentioned?"

Zeprowski looks even more discomfited. "Just a little thing. It's right up your alley. Piece of cake, really." He performs a kind of gyration like an ursine belly dancer as he fishes for something in his trouser pocket. "I thought maybe you wouldn't mind returning this for me."

And he opens his hand to reveal a gold scarab.

I feel a strange prickling sensation in my scalp. I am afraid it is my hair turning white. "Where did you get that?" I gasp.

"Did you ever have a mother?" he asks.

These hundred-and-eighty-degree subject shifts have me a little rattled. "What kind of a question is that? D'you think I was delivered by U.P.S.?"

He waves a disclaiming paw. "No offense. All I mean is, you probably know what mothers are like sometimes. Mine has this habit of picking up stuff. Usually it's things like cards of pearl buttons or a lipstick or a can of cat food. But she happens to be one of the Lady Friends at Dr. Potterby's shindig the other night, and this time she hits the jackpot."

"How did she get away with it?"

Zeprowski sighs. "Damfiknow," he says. "She must have some technique of her own. Sometimes I think she could go through an airport check with a bazooka in her reticule and it wouldn't register a buzz. But this bug has to go back before—well, I don't like to think of dear old Ma in the pokey. So if you would just sneak into Potterby's museum and put this back on the shelf or whatever . . ."

"No," I say, resolutely spreading marmalade.

"Besides which, my examination for lieutenant is coming up soon, and how's it going to look if it comes out that I've got a mother in the clink?"

"No," I repeat. "My relations with my parole officer are pretty good right now. I can't risk it."

"Besides which, you may remember, I gave you an alibi one time when I saw you at a basketball game during the time the D.A. was trying to pin a robbery on you. I think you owe me one."

"I'll send you a thank you card this afternoon."

"Besides which," Zeprowski persists, "there is still a good deal of departmental interest in you and your involvement with the disappearance of 'Toad-Face' O'Toole some months back. A certain public-spirited pigeon named Nobby the Knife keeps telling us you had something to do with it. I might be able to get you off the hook."

In the end, it just goes to prove that a heavy-handed threat will win out over an altruistic plea anytime.

**D**r. Rufus T. Potterby's museum turns out to be an architectural combination I don't recall ever having encountered before—a mixture of English Tudor and ancient Egyptian, the latter being a square edifice fronted by a series of columns that had been grafted onto the former by an entrance foyer. Evidently the Tudor bit is Potterby's living quarters and the Egyp-

tian bit is his hobbyhorse. Disregarding a notice that says "Open by Appointment Only," I jingle a bell and presently a short, rotund man responds, opens the door a crack, and says, "Open by Appointment Only."

I hand my card to Dr. Potterby—for it is he in person—holding it by the edges in case the ink isn't quite dry yet, and he regards it owlshly.

"Professor Boswell Potterby?" he says. "F.R.A., F.R.S., O.B.T.? Wytherynge-on-the-Vyne, Gloucestershire, England?"

"The very same," I assure him. "Just passing through, don't you know? Saw your name in some guidebook or other. Couldn't resist the temptation to find out if you happened to be related to the Gloucestershire Potterbys."

Dr. Potterby digests this while I digest Dr. Potterby.

He seems to resemble one of his pills, being roundish and smoothish and a study in pink. His face is pink; his scalp is pink, giving a pinkish cast to his wispy hair and to his white suit. He reminds me strangely of bubble gum.

"A most distinguished branch," I continue. "Doubtless you've heard of some of our illustrious forebears—Sir Lionel Potterby, for instance, who accompanied Richard the Lion-Hearted on that crusade. Sir Gladwyn Potterby, of course, the hero of Waterloo?"

"Certainly," says Dr. Potterby, blinking. "Won't you come in?"

I babble on, creating a Potterby cast of characters, and Dr. Potterby seems appropriately dazzled at the possibility of acquiring these eminent relatives. Soon he is recalling an uncle who emigrated to America in the early 1800's and who may well have come from Gloucestershire, and we are on such a good footing that when I inquire about the distinctive appearance of this building I elicit an invitation to tour the Potterby collection.

The first thing to greet me is a couple of workmen assembling a structure that looks like a telephone booth. Potterby notes my questioning look and explains.

"That is my new metal detector. We had an unfortunate incident the other night during which a most valuable scarab disappeared. From now on, everyone leaving will have to pass through this checkpoint."

"Jolly good idea," I enthuse, mentally blessing the impulse that led me to leave the scarab in a safe place while I reconnoitered the territory. "But a thief wouldn't necessarily walk out your front door with his—er—loot?"



"This one did!" frowns Dr. Potterby. "I strongly suspect a certain female with a reputation for purloining small objects, and I mean to make an example of her. One has to nip this kind of thing in the bud, don't you agree?"

"Certainly! But what about your professional burglar?"

Dr. Potterby looks wise. "Oh, I have anticipated him, too. See here—" and he points out electric eye arrangements on the only door opening into the display room. "There are no windows, you see, and no other way out except—that is, the museum is virtually sealed."

He hurries on, pointing out various items in his collection, mostly in glass-covered cases and ranging from small pieces of jewelry and faience ware to a full-sized sarcophagus standing against one wall. He notices my involuntary shudder and with a frosty smile asks if I am thinking of all those Grade B movies in which resuscitated mummies go slithering about the neighborhood with evil intent.

"Not at all," I reply. "Actually, it's your American air conditioning. I find it rather on the chilly side."

"Has to be," he responds. "For the exhibits. Some of them could be seriously damaged by humidity combined with heat, so I installed an extra-large air treatment system in my museum."

"Well, it seems you have taken all the necessary precautions," I tell him as we conclude the tour and I prepare to leave.

"Oh, there's more!" Dr. Potterby beams. "I am hiring two security guards who will have the museum under watch after exhibit hours. I don't propose to lose another item," he concludes, "and the next unfortunate who tries will find a most unpleasant surprise awaiting him. Or her." He gives a wintry chuckle, something like a Torquemada who has just taken delivery on a new and improved rack and is looking forward to the next heretic.

**I**t is some time after one A.M.

The lark on the wing and the snail on the thorn have both checked their time cards "Out" and called it a day.

I am in Dr. Potterby's museum. I think.

It is not for me to divulge the secrets of the burgling business to all and sundry. Suffice it to say that a Class 1-A Professional can get into practically anyplace—especially if given a hint that the place is "virtually" sealed and if making some deductions about some outsized air conditioning ducts.

So here I am in my Burglar's Basic Black outfit ready to replace

Ma Zeprowski's scarab, only to be completely baffled, for the room I'm in bears no resemblance to Dr. Potterby's Egyptian museum which I toured earlier. This room is just as long, but a lot narrower, and looks like a sitting room or library, with a fireplace and upholstered chairs and walls hung with art works—oil paintings, some drawings, a set of bronze bas relief panels, and more. There are no windows and only one door opposite the fireplace, so after checking out the whole room with my little penlight I try the door. It opens into an oddly-shaped blank wall. Prodding this, I find it gives a bit, so I prod further and it opens silently. A moment later I am in the Egyptian room, which I find I have entered via the sarcophagus I noted that afternoon.

It is all very curious, but I haven't the time to puzzle it out. The display case supposed to contain the scarab is only steps away, and it is only a moment's work to slip the scarab into it. A piece of cake as Sergeant Zeprowski had prophesied, and all that remains is to zip back the way I came, when the cake suddenly crumbles.

The lights come on.

"Ho!" says a voice.

"Aha!" says another voice.

"Oho!" says a third voice.

Voice Number Two is Dr. Potterby, in a bright pink dressing gown, flanked by those two bruisers, Lefty and Hefty. At first glance, the effect is like being accosted by a very large bologna sandwich.

"Well!" says Lefty.

"Well, well!" says Hefty. "If it isn't our old pal Kit."

"You know this person?" asks Dr. Potterby.

"We've met," says Lefty, cracking his knuckles.

"We've been hoping to run into him again," says Hefty, flexing a bicep.

This is all rather worrisome, as these two have apparently gone in for muscular development from an early age. Probably had their strained peas laced with steroids, if the truth were known.

"Well, whoever he is, he isn't Professor Boswell Potterby, of the Gloucestershire Potterbys," says Dr. P. "I talked to some friends of mine in England this afternoon, and they drew a blank on him. So why don't you fellows keep an eye on him while I call the police?"

"Is it okay if we smash him up a little?" asks Lefty hopefully.

"Smash away," says Dr. Potterby cordially, and exits.

Lefty and Hefty roll up their sleeves and spit on their hands.

"Wait, fellas," I protest. "You know there's no sense in both of you getting your knuckles dirty when one of you is more than enough to tear me apart. Why doesn't the toughest one do the job and be done with it?"

They think this over and nod. "Good idea!" say both, simultaneously. They both take a step forward, adding, "I'll do it."

"He said the toughest," says Lefty.

"Yeah. That's me," says Hefty.

"Who says?"

"I say."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Izzat so?"

"You bet!"

"I don't have to take anything from a guy with a moniker like Allardyce," says Lefty, his lip curling.

"Don't call me Allardyce!" growls Hefty.

"Allardyce—Allardyce—Allar—" The "dyce" is lost as Lefty develops a sudden speech impediment due to the intrusion of several knuckles into his teeth.

Lefty retorts by socking Hefty in the eye.

Hefty drives a fist some inches into Lefty's stomach.

Lefty bites Hefty's nose.

Then things start to get rowdy.

I feel like a tourist who, trying to cross a Spanish street, discovers he is running with the bulls in Pamplona. Large bodies roll toward me from all points of the compass, and the air is charged with fists and imprecations. I take refuge from this traveling imbroglio behind a display case and avert my eyes from the carnage. Then suddenly there is the distinctive sound of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object, followed by a deathly silence.

There is Lefty supine on the parquetry with a careworn look, and Hefty atop him, also showing signs of desuetude. Both are out cold, and if this were a cartoon there would be a balloon overhead with little birds saying "tweet-tweet."

"Merciful heavens!" Dr. Potterby, returning, regards the debacle with horror. "What happened?"

I shrug modestly. "Had to teach them a lesson, you know. Can't have blokes going around threatening other blokes."

Dr. Potterby is shaken but still determined. He pulls a big old Colt .45 from the pocket of his dressing gown and aims it nervously

in my general direction. "S-S-Stay where you are, whoever you are!" he sputters: "The police will take care of you when they get here in the next few minutes!"

I give him a quizzical look. "Are you sure you want the police involved in this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your scarab is back where it belongs . . ."

"It is?" He steals a quick glance at the display case and his mouth forms an O of astonishment. "It is!" Then he reverts to his blustering manner. "I see it all! You couldn't overcome your guilty conscience and had to return it, is that it? Well, I told you I intended to make an example of the thief, and I shall do so!"

I sigh. "Too bad. That means I'll have to tell them about that secret room of yours behind the sarcophagus."

"Secret room?"

"With all the interesting artworks. That Fragonard oil painting, for instance—the one that looks so much like the one that disappeared from the Tutweiler Galleries seven years ago. And those bronzes—aren't they the door panels that have been missing from the cathedral of Benevento since World War II? And is that a genuine Picasso? I'm sure the police would like to check it out—along with the rest. Seems you've been collecting more than just Egyptian artifacts, doctor!"

Potterby's face has been undergoing some fascinating color changes, ranging from its customary pink to ash grey and pale green. The revolver drops from his trembling hand. "Merciful heavens!" he bleats again. "What shall I do?"

There is the sound of policemen hammering on a distant door.

"Oh, you'll think of something," I say, and as he turns his attention to the oncoming fuzz, I am through the sarcophagus into the hidden room and out the way I came.

**G**randma Grady's cuisine might have to climb a few notches to reach the haute stage, but even Julia Child would have to admit that his coffee is just what the ex-cat burglar needs who has spent an active evening and lost a lot of sleep while climbing walls, scampering over roofs, and easing through ductwork. I don't know what he brews it with—nitroglycerin, perhaps—but after two cups the world loses its monotone aspect and the two sunny-side-up eggs on my plate seem to stop looking at me with disapproval.



But before I can ply my knife and fork I find I have company: reading from left to right, Sergeant Zeprowski and an elderly dumpling of a woman with her grey hair in a bun atop her head and a rosy-cheeked smile on the phiz.

"Hi, Kit—er—Augie," says Zeprowski. "This is my mother."

We exchange how-dos and Zeprowski continues. "I hear Dr. Potterby found his missing scarab."

I nod. "Merely mislaid, I understand. Slipped behind the back of the display case or something."

Mrs. Zeprowski beams. "However it happened, Sonny and I want to thank you for your help."

"Sonny?"

Zeprowski, blushing, hurries on. "And Ma wants you to know that she feels she has learned a good lesson."

"From now on I'll be sure that when my fingers do the walking they'll do it empty-handed," says Mrs. Z.

"So all's well that ends well," says Sergeant Z.

"A good line," I observe. "Remind me to write it down. And what news of Lefty and Hefty?"

"An odd thing about them. Seems they both ran into doors and knocked themselves out. Dr. Potterby seemed undecided as to whether he really needed two security guards that size. Well, thanks again, Augie. We'll be on our way."

"So long, Sonny." I watch them leave and turn back to my breakfast and call crossly to Grandma Grady, "Hey, Grandma, I ordered two eggs!"

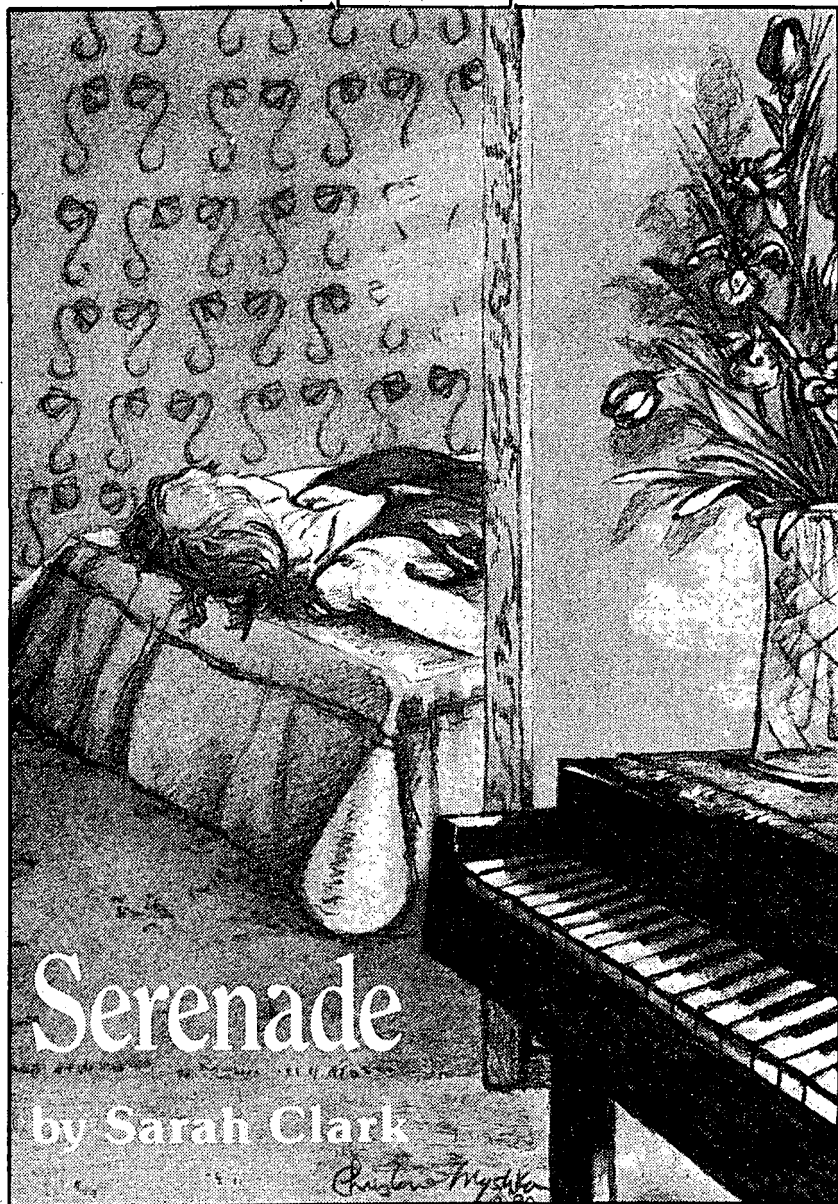
"I brought you two eggs," says Grandma.

Sure enough, I remember two eggs looking at me earlier where but one eyes me now. I don't recall eating one. I see Mrs. Zeprowski just going out the door, reticule in hand, and think to myself, *Could she have?*

*Nah!*

*But—could she?*

FICTION



# Serenade

by Sarah Clark

*Christine Myszka*

Illustration by Christine Myszka

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The sound of the flute echoed through the apartment. James Galway again. The beautiful, cool melody of Chopin's Nocturne in E Flat floated from the adjacent bedroom. Next comes Hamlish's "Dreamers," then . . . The tape had been playing for hours now, over and over and over. Joshua put his head in his hands. It was the signal. There was no use in fighting. He pulled his suitcases out from underneath the bed, setting them neatly on the spread, and started packing. A clean break. That's what he'd promised her. No recriminations. No ugly scenes.

"No screaming matches. I won't have them," Elisa had told him in November when she'd decided it was time he give up his efficiency on the Fenway and move into her Beacon Street apartment.

"When I'm angry, I go into my room, meditate, play my tapes. Anger simply has no place in my life. I purge ugly emotions as soon as I sense them. Once you start meditating, you'll do the same. That's why you'll have your own room. We each need our own space."

Joshua heard the click of the tape coming to an end, the snap as Elisa flicked it over, then the trilling of Faure's "Berceuse." He could picture her lying among the pink and white

flounces of her bed, her golden hair tossed with artistic carelessness against the satin pillows, her eyes closed, listening to the music with a concentration that would shut out everything else in the world.

"When I meditate, I visualize a snowcapped mountain, a field of black-eyed Susans, a pine forest, and I stay there until I'm healed. World War III could come and I'd never know." Elisa would not hear the honking of the Monday morning traffic on Storror Drive, the opening and shutting of the bureau drawers in Joshua's room.

Meditating hadn't worked for Joshua. When Elisa would close her door, refusing to discuss what it was he had done that had caused her to scream at him, Joshua would sink his head on the teak dining room table and grind his teeth. Oh, he had tried going into his room, putting the *Gentle Mountain Stream* tape on, but all he could ever think about was why she was being so unreasonable. Why she wouldn't talk to him. What had he done that was so wrong? When an hour, an evening, or a day later, Elisa would emerge from her room and calmly start their life together again as if she had never been angry with him, Joshua had not complained because she always emerged so exquisitely in a

shimmering negligee, the golden hair cascading, the blue eyes sparkling with life and warmth. Meditation certainly did wonders for Elisa, that Joshua couldn't deny; but for him, it was all pretense. He would flip off the mountain stream and read the latest Dick Francis, shoving it under his mattress when he heard Elisa's tape deck switch off, or more often, simply falling asleep over the book, going around the house on tip-toe the next morning, leaving for class with Elisa's rejection still in force behind her locked bedroom door. More and more over the last few months, she wouldn't emerge to take him in her arms for twenty-four hours, sometimes even longer.

I suppose, Joshua told himself bitterly, I should have made the connection between the increased length of her dismissals . . . maybe the reason she couldn't tell me what was wrong was simply that she'd fallen out of love with me and didn't know how to say so. He'd never really understood how someone as beautiful as Elisa could have loved him in the first place. And yet just last month she'd said they were engaged. It didn't make sense.

They had started dating in September when, as freshmen at the Conservatory, they'd been assigned a piano-flute duet.

What had begun as professional admiration had progressed quickly to sexual attraction and then love. At least she'd said she loved him, asked him to move in with her even if there had always seemed to be something she was holding back, something Joshua had preferred to think of in his romantic haze as her mysterious elusiveness. As for me, I will always love her, Joshua told himself as he shoved his socks in his suitcase. That's why I'm leaving; because I love her so much, I'll do as she wishes. Leave without ever knowing why.

When he had given her the Galway tape three months ago, he'd said jokingly, "It'll add a little variation to your meditation music."

Elisa had frowned. "I never play regular music when I'm meditating. I couldn't meditate to this because I'd be too busy listening to the music." Then she'd gripped his hand. "If we ever fight and I go into my room and play this, it will mean it's all over between us." Her eyes had filled with tears. "Yes, yes, that's it, Joshua. So much better than a long drawn-out goodbye. Let this be our sign. I'll buy you a copy of the tape too. And if—"

"Please, Elisa, don't. Anyway, I'll never leave you."



The next evening, pristine in its plastic wrapping, Joshua had found a copy of the tape on top of his dresser.

He hesitated in the hallway, longing to knock on her door. Couldn't they just talk? At least a goodbye kiss?

"You must promise me simply to go if that happens. No goodbyes. No clings. Please. It's all I ask."

He had thought her absurdly romantic, but he had promised.

Joshua stared at the closed door, his throat constricted with the pain of holding back his goodbye. Then, bowed down with the weight of his suitcases, tape deck, and cassette case, he struggled to the door. The strains of Grieg's "Morning" resonated after him.

"Says he left this morning around ten o'clock. They'd had some kind of disagreement last night, and when he woke up, she was playing a song on her tape recorder that meant he was supposed to leave. Out he goes, drops his bags off at a friend's on Marlborough Street, spends all afternoon at a rehearsal. Cool character, if you ask me. Psychopath, probably." Sergeant Meese snapped his notebook shut and looked at his superior officer with satisfaction. Open

and shut case, body and murderer found all in the same day.

Lieutenant Shultz Winchell, however, was not smiling. Even if she had been as sure as Meese that they had the perpetrator behind bars, she would not be smiling. The picture of Elisa Reynals splayed across her bed, the strangulation marks a strident crimson against the soft rosininess of the sheets, canceled Shultz's smile.

A few minutes later, staring into the white face of Joshua Traynor, Shultz was even less satisfied. She did not share Meese's opinion that Joshua was a cool customer. For one thing, tears were streaming down his face. Of course, that didn't make him innocent, didn't even make him sane. Shultz had seen murderers who could cry on command. Hell, they weren't all crocodile tears, either. A man could shoot his wife and cry. After all, he'd loved her, that's why he shot her, because he couldn't live without her.

Shultz, after fifteen years on the Boston police force, did not have a high opinion of marriage or love. Forty years old, Gretchen Maureen Shultz Winchell was a short, stocky stump of a woman, though not without physical charm. This charm she tried her best to camouflage, hiding good legs under shape-

less slacks, keeping her natural blonde hair closely cropped, and not worrying about the extra ten pounds as long as it didn't slow down her footwork. To ensure it didn't, Shultzzy did her daily jog despite her hatred of that particular form of exercise. Her most amazing physical asset she hid behind tinted eyeglasses. Police officers have no right having violet eyes, but Shultzzy's would have made Elizabeth Taylor jealous. The beauty of those eyes merely annoyed Shultzzy. Twenty years before she'd loved passionately and married a young police officer who'd volunteered for Vietnam and come home in a box. The day after she buried Michael, Shultzzy applied for the police academy. Despite the fact that the times were not the greatest for women wanting to be police officers, she'd made it. This was partly due to her own monomania and partly to the fact that one Ignatius Winchell, her father-in-law and precinct commander in South Boston, let the word get out that anyone who tried any funny stuff with Shultzzy would be walking a beat forever.

Shultzzy leaned back in her chair and regarded Joshua Traynor. He had just finished reciting the same story he'd given Meese earlier. If he were lying, he was an accomplished

liar, he didn't trip up once. Out of the corner of her eye, Shultzzy could see Meese twitching. He wants to go in for the kill, Shultzzy thought, hammer away at the guy. Music student. Twenty years old. Shouldn't be hard to break him. But ... there was always the chance he might be telling the truth.

"And what was this fight about?" Shultzzy asked.

"That's just it, I don't even know myself." Joshua waved his hands in front of his face. "I came in from rehearsal last night, and Elisa said to me that she just couldn't take any more. I asked what she meant, and she said if I didn't know she wasn't about to tell me. Then she went to her room, saying that in the morning I'd know whether there was any hope for us or not. When I woke up to the James Galway, I knew I had to pack."

"And what did she mean she couldn't take any more?"

"Oh, God, I wish I knew. That was what was driving me nuts, she'd get mad at me for the strangest reasons. Sometimes, like last night, for no reason at all, and she'd never explain. The rehearsal had ended an hour earlier than it was supposed to, that was all I could figure, but it doesn't sound like a reason to break off with someone, does it?"

"Hardly." Shultzzy looked at the young man. He was sitting bolt upright, no slouching rock musician this guy.

"What instrument did you say you played?"

"The flute. That's my main instrument anyway. Of course, I play piccolo, too, and I can manage on the oboe and piano."

"A classical musician then. And Elisa Reynals, she was the same?"

"Yes, she was a pianist. She was very good." Joshua winced. Shultzzy noticed his fingers then. Long and delicate, the fingers of his right hand were tapping nervously into the palm of his left. She wondered if the tapping were random, or if Joshua Traynor had a song in his head he was playing into his hands.

"Do you have any witnesses that might confirm your statement that you left the apartment at ten o'clock?"

Joshua's fingers stopped tapping. One hand clutched the other as he thought back over the morning's events.

"I stopped in the lobby to check the mailbox. One of the ladies who lives on the second floor was there. I don't know her name, but she's an older lady, maybe sixty, with a little dog that's always with her. I asked her what it was once, some name that sounded like she was sneezing. Then I went

to the corner and got a cab to Marlborough. I suppose there were people on the street, but I wasn't really noticing. And I don't know the name of the cab driver or anything, except he had an accent, Russian, I think. When I got to Fred's, I had to wait around for an hour or so on his stoop."

Joshua sighed. If only Fred had been at home at ten fifteen to confirm his arrival, if only there'd been somebody he'd talked to. Then he brightened as he remembered the guy with the bicycle.

"Oh, yeah; a guy locked up his bicycle and asked me to keep an eye on it as long as I was there. He was visiting someone in the building. I guess he got there around ten thirty or ten forty-five. I don't know his name either, though." Joshua's fingers resumed their noiseless tapping.

"That's all right, I'm sure we can find them." Shultzzy looked up at Meese, who reconciled himself to an afternoon of checking up on little old ladies and elusive bicyclists. He hoped the dog wasn't a snapper. Meese hated small dogs. His idea of a dog was his Doberman. Any dog that reached only ankle-high wasn't a dog but an oversized rat in Meese's opinion. Somehow the dogs sensed Meese's disapproval of them and usu-

ally expressed their own by nipping him.

"You say the cleaning lady came every Saturday at noon?"

"Yes. We usually went out Saturday for lunch, and she'd be finished by about two. I had a rehearsal most Saturday afternoons, and Elisa went to practice alone or sometimes just took the day off. She liked to shop on Saturdays. She was crazy about clothes."

"You two seemed to have a lot of money for two students," Shultz commented.

"Not really. Elisa just lucked out on that apartment. She'd gotten it with a girl she'd met in Marblehead this summer. Some really rich kid whose parents took out a year's lease. They knew it was much too expensive for Elisa, but they were so happy to have someone stable as their daughter's roommate they didn't care. They must be very rich because when the daughter ran off to L.A., they said they'd keep paying the rent. Of course, if she ever came back, I'd have been out of my room, but Elisa was pretty sure that wouldn't happen."

"These folks in Marblehead, their generosity didn't extend so far as to providing Elisa with money for clothes?" Shultz had seen Elisa's closets, jammed with the latest designer originals.

"No, of course not, but she loved bargains. She knew every thrift shop and bargain basement in Boston. She'd come home with bags stuffed with clothes and then tell me she'd got it all for ten or twenty dollars. She even found some place that sold clothes from society people and entertainers, dresses that cost thousands of dollars and they'd only been worn a couple of times."

"And she could get a dress that cost a thousand dollars for ten?"

Shultz thought the idea of a dress costing a thousand dollars slightly obscene, but she was also damn certain that even a society matron wouldn't sell a dress for that much under purchase price.

"Sure. Of course, if you knew Elisa, you'd understand. She could talk anyone into anything, and then she's so beautiful..." Joshua's fingers convulsed suddenly. "I just can't believe all this. All I can think of is that the cleaning lady must have left the door open and some crackpot snuck in and..."

Shultz could see she didn't have much time. The shock was wearing off, Traynor was about to fall apart. Meese, thinking the same thing, was still hoping Shultz would come down hard on the kid.

"One more thing, Mr. Traynor, and then you can go home. Why did you have separate bedrooms?"

"It was Elisa's idea. In case her parents came to visit; she wanted them to think we were just roommates."

"Then where did you sleep?"

"In my bedroom."

"And Elisa slept in hers?"

"Yes."

"Her parents came to visit that often?"

"No . . . I guess they came a couple of times, or at least her mother did." Joshua pressed his fingers together almost as if in prayer, then rubbed one hand gracefully against the other. "It wasn't just her parents. Elisa liked to keep her room just for herself. When we slept together, it was in my bed. When she went into her room, she wanted complete privacy. She locked the door even. I told her I wouldn't go in without knocking, but she said that I might forget and just walk in on her. Sometimes she'd invite me in to show me something new she'd bought, and when she had girlfriends up, they'd go in her room, but mostly it was just for her."

"One last question, and I'm afraid it is rather personal." Shultzzy paused for just a second to let Joshua prepare himself. "When was the last time you

and Elisa made love?"

Joshua's fingers tightened around each other.

"Two months ago." He looked up and his eyes met Shultzzy's. "I guess I should have figured she was getting tired of me, but except for not wanting sex, she seemed happy. Last time we went to visit her parents, she even dropped a hint about our getting married. I asked her if she really meant it, and she said yes. Then she told me that she'd stopped having sex with me because she wanted to make up her mind about me without being muddled up by passion. I said great, then we'll get married, and she said engaged, we couldn't afford to get married, which is true. My parents would have killed me if I got married, but I would have taken the chance rather than lose Elisa. That was a couple of weeks ago. . . . I don't understand why if she wanted to marry me at the end of March, she kicks me out in April."

For a moment Joshua seemed to have forgotten all about the murder, his pain was for the broken engagement. Now's the time to get him, Meese thought, ask him if he was angry about her dumping him, how angry

... "She still didn't have sex with you after telling you she wanted to marry you? That upset you?"



Okay, Shultzzy, not tough, but in the ball park.

"She said she had a yeast infection."

"And you believed her?" This time Shultzzy's voice was sharp.

"Of course. Why would she lie?"

Why indeed?

"Did you have any indication that she was planning on breaking the engagement?"

"Not really. I mean she was up and down. Loving me one minute, and then yelling at me, telling me to go stay with Fred for the night, or just locking herself in her room. I had got used to it . . . She never wanted to talk about what was wrong. She just liked to meditate, that was how she'd calm herself down. The only thing different today was she put on the Galway tape, and she'd told me if she ever played that tape, it was all over. Still, I sort of half expected she might call Fred's tomorrow. I didn't want to believe she was really through with me."

Traynor's fingers rested on his lap, finally still.

Shultzzy stared at him. He was either phenomenally naïve or phenomenally clever.

"Don't go out of town, Mr. Traynor. I assume we'll be able to reach you at the Marlborough Street address?"

She motioned to the scowling

Meese. "The sergeant will show you out."

It was a gorgeous bedroom, not Shultzzy's choice of decor or fabrics, satin sheets gave her the willies, but of its kind, Elisa Reynals' boudoir was without peer.

"Smells like money, doesn't it?" Shultzzy wrinkled up her nose at Meese.

"Smells like fancy perfume," Meese answered, leaning over Elisa's dressing table where the pungent fragrance of Giorgio still lingered. "Smells better than it did yesterday anyway."

Shultzzy pushed the sliding doors open and stepped out onto the roof garden. Geraniums were flourishing in the boxes lining the brick wall. Shultzzy, a compulsive gardener, picked off some wilting blooms and gazed out over the Charles River where a few weekday sailboats scuttled along in the late April wind.

"Quite a place," Shultzzy remarked. "A two thousand dollar view. And no name on that lease but Elisa Reynals. I guess love can make you believe anything."

"What makes you think he wasn't making up the story himself?" Meese asked.

"Everything else checked out, didn't it? Mrs. Cunningham and her Lhasa apso. Vladimir

Whatever-his-last-name-was.  
The bicycling visitor."

"You think those clothes are going to check out as coming from Filene's and Goodwill?" Meese growled.

"Nope." Shultzzy turned and leaned against the wall, looking toward the apartment and the sergeant. "I don't think much of what Elisa Reynals told Joshua Traynor is going to check out. The question is, did he find out about the game she was playing and kill her, or did one of the other players, and to find that out, we've got to find out just what her game was."

Shultzzy walked across the patio to the living room french doors. "This is interesting. Two doors out to the garden. One from her bedroom, one from the living room. Was this unlocked yesterday morning?"

Shultzzy opened the door and stepped onto the heavy shag carpet of the living room.

Meese flipped through his notes. "According to Traynor and the cleaning woman, they never locked the ones in the living room. There was no way anyone could get on the roof, and they didn't want to get locked out themselves. Reynals always locked her bedroom slider, or that's what Traynor assumed."

The living room was as elegantly furnished as Elisa's bed-

room, matching couches upholstered in a soft blue brocade, wing chairs to match, powder blue carpet. Posters for concerts in Vienna, Paris, London, all expensively framed, hung on the walls. Dominating the room was the grand piano. Shultzzy raised the lid and ran her fingers over the keys. She winced as the piano announced its flatness.

"Traynor was certainly telling the truth about its being out of tune. Strange, with all the money she was throwing around, she wouldn't have her piano tuned." Shultzzy fingered the brocade runner that covered the top of the piano. A crystal vase filled with tulips, irises, and daffodils took the place of honor usually reserved for candelabra.

"He said the downstairs neighbors had complained about the noise... yeah, here it is..." Meese read from his notes. "Said he couldn't believe it when she told him. Seems he thought she was such a wonderful player they should have been grateful." Meese snapped his notepad closed. "I guess some folks aren't classical music fans."

"I think we should find out," Shultzzy said.

Bill Meese couldn't really see why it was important, other than to establish just how much

of a psychopathic liar Elisa Reynals had been, but Shultz was the boss. Detail, she had to run down every single detail in a case. You never know which stone the key is hidden under, she'd say, if he were to mention that maybe it was a waste of time.

"Why no, we didn't complain." Mrs. Franklin shook her head sorrowfully at Shultz. "I just can't believe it, that poor girl getting murdered in broad daylight right here. Oh, it just makes you sick, doesn't it?"

Shultz nodded in agreement and asked, "You're quite sure you never complained? Perhaps Mr. Franklin?"

"Heavens, no, Mr. Franklin wouldn't complain about noise. He's deaf, dear. And I didn't complain because I never heard any piano playing. The walls are really quite thick. We never hear anything from upstairs, and I suppose like most young people they probably play those stereos of theirs quite loud. I know my grandson does. When we go visit my daughter, I have all I can do to keep myself from complaining, but no, dear, I never complained about Miss Reynals."

"So she was lying again. I don't see that it really gets us any closer to her murderer, ex-

cept that maybe she told one lie too many somewhere along the line." Meese shook his head.

"The question is, why was she lying? She must have been able to play the piano. She had the money to have it tuned. Her lie about the rent makes some sense. She didn't want Traynor to know that she had that kind of money. But why have an expensive piano you don't play?"

"Window dressing?"

"Sure, if you're rich and can't play the piano maybe you buy one for window dressing, but not if you can play."

"Look, Shultz, this kid didn't make a lot of sense. She had a piano she didn't play, a boyfriend she didn't sleep with. Maybe she was just some ditz debutante who wanted to get away from home. Maybe the story she fed Joshua wasn't such a lie, maybe she's the rich kid from Marblehead. Didn't want to be loved for her money alone, so she cooks up this story about her roommate leaving, about her being on scholarship. When she's satisfied he's not after her money, she decides she has to be sure he's not just after her body. You got to admit she was beautiful and hung up on all this meditation stuff, she'd be the kind who'd want a man to love her 'whole person,' right?"

"Whole person?"

"Yeah, you know . . ."

Meese lowered his voice. "Her soul?"

"Her soul. So she was setting up all these tests for Traynor? Sounds like something out of Camelot. Still, you know, you might be on to something. What gave you that idea?" Shultzzy looked at Meese quizzically. Meese was not exactly her candidate for being up on the latest in the New Age set.

Meese rubbed his neck. A gesture that Shultzzy knew meant "Don't ask if you know what's good for you." She, of course, asked.

"Bill, don't tell me you're into crystals and Windham Hill? No, no, don't be embarrassed, I think it's great." Shultzzy grinned as Meese continued to attack his neck.

"I'm not, but Claire is. She takes classes at that Kripalu center in Watertown. Dresses up in white pants and floppy shirts and wears all this jewelry that's supposed to take away bad vibrations." Meese shrugged. It had seemed damn silly to him at first, a forty-five-year-old woman dressing up in what looked to him like pajamas, sitting on the floor, murmuring to fancy pieces of glass. Still, Claire had been happier lately.

"She says you got to be in touch with your 'whole person.'

Wants me to sign up, too."

"Well, Bill, I think you ought to. You always did look good in uniform; let me know when you do, I want to see you in that white outfit."

Meese pressed down on the accelerator. "We're going to Lynn, right?"

"Yep. Check out the family. Lynn. I never really thought of it as being debutante country, and there is one flaw in your theory, Bill. That piano still doesn't make sense." Shultzzy leaned back and shut her eyes. "I'm not meditating; I'm thinking. How about a little music?"

Meese punched the dial to his favorite country and western station.

Shultzzy grinned. Bill was a Willie Nelson fan. As Willie complained about Lucille leaving him, Shultzzy pictured Bill in his cowboy boots and Kripalu pants.

**"I** think maybe the debutante theory is out," Shultzzy said.

Meese stared at the Reynals house. A five room ranch, picture window in the living room looking out on an identical ranch across the street. Definitely not your millionaire's mansion. Not even executive's row. No, more like middle class by a hair. On the tiny lawn a few frazzled tulips

drooped, their petals battered by the wind. A road runner lawn ornament trotted jauntily in place, unaffected by the tragedy within the house.

"She was on scholarship, our Lissa was. Worked all summer at a piano bar in Marblehead. Got real good tips, that's how come she was able to buy so many nice clothes. And she needed them for when she'd perform. And then it was a big help sharing that apartment with . . ." Myrna Reynals' voice shook. "And to think we were so relieved she was living with him. Thought she'd be safe, you know. I suppose you think that's awful of us, not being upset at her living in sin. Oh, I know they said they were just roommates, but of course we knew. The world's just like that nowadays, no one wants to wait until they're married any more. But at least he seemed like a nice boy, her own age and in school with her."

"What my wife means is we'd have liked anyone better than that jerk she was going with last summer," Carl Reynals angrily interjected. "We'll never forgive ourselves. What are you waiting for anyway? When are you going to lock him up?"

"Joshua Traynor left the apartment at ten o'clock, Mr. Reynals. According to the . . ." Shultz stopped. She didn't want

to say "autopsy" with Elisa Reynals' graduation picture staring her in the face. "... to our report, your daughter was killed after ten o'clock."

"How can you prove—" Carl Reynals stopped. He didn't want to know. "He could have snuck back in."

"We're checking on that." Shultz took a sip of the tea that Mrs. Reynals had forced upon them. Her mug was decorated in a flower pattern, underneath which was stamped *Happy Mother's Day*.

"Lissa gave me that last Mother's Day." Mrs. Reynals nodded her head at the mug. "Last time she was here, she picked it up and said, 'This year, Ma, you're getting a whole lot more than just a cheap mug with some carnations. Joshua and I are planning something real special.'" Myrna Reynals sobbed. "Something real special."

"There was no reason for you to think, then, that she and Joshua weren't getting along?" Shultz pressed onward.

"Oh, no, why she was even dropping hints about marriage. It seemed a little soon to me, they're only freshmen, but you see, we knew the boy had some money. Lissa said his trust fund covered their rent."

Shultz and Meese exchanged glances. Lissa Reynals



apparently didn't care about keeping her stories straight. Shultzzy began to get a picture of Elisa, the ultimate charmer, talented, beautiful, vivacious, always telling people what they wanted to hear, or what she figured they'd swallow if she coated the pill with enough sugar. It would be interesting finding out what other stories she'd dreamt up.

"Yet Saturday she'd decided to break up with him?"

"I suppose she'd found someone else. She was so beautiful; boys were always falling for her. She must have realized she'd made a mistake and . . ." Mrs. Reynals broke down again. "I suppose he killed her out of jealousy."

Carl Reynals punched the arm of his chair.

Shultzzy flinched, thinking of what such a blow would do to Joshua Traynor's hands.

Meese looked approvingly at Reynals.

"What was the name of Lissa's summer boyfriend? Is he still around here?"

"Dan Paul, no. I don't know where he is. Lissa broke up with him the end of August. She wouldn't tell us where he went. She knew what I'd do to him if I found him." Reynals crushed the plush of the chair in his hands. "He hit her. Gave her a black eye. I told her if he

ever showed up here again, I'd show him what an eye for an eye meant."

Ralph Jordan, proprietor of The Blue Parrot Harborside Lounge, leaned back on his bar stool.

"Dan Paul? Yeah, he came in here. Picked up Lissa after work, that sort of thing. He was a regular anyway, that's how they met. He'll feel damn bad about this. Course they broke up last year, but still."

"How late in the season are you open?" Shultzzy looked out at Marblehead harbor, the whitecaps racing across the bay.

"Columbus Day. Lissa came back every weekend. We open up Patriot's Day, but she wasn't starting until after the thirtieth. Too much schoolwork, she said. Damn." Jordan shook his head, whether at the tragedy of Lissa's death or at the inconvenience; Shultzzy couldn't tell.

"And Dan Paul, where is he now?"

"Somewhere in the Caribbean, I guess. He takes his boat down there in winter, then sails up here in the summer." Ralph Jordan shook his head again dolefully and snuffled into his handkerchief. "Hard to believe, isn't it? A kid like that. Damn good piano player, too. No temperament. People wanted to

hear something five times in a row, she'd do it. I'm gonna miss her. I suppose this new boyfriend killed her. Some women just can't pick 'em."

"What do you mean?" Shultz asked quietly.

"Well, Dan used to beat up on her, and she drops him and then takes up with this musician, and last week when she was in here about coming back to work, she tells me the new boyfriend's no different. Said she was going to have to break up with him. Poor kid." Ralph Jordan sighed. "You found him?"

"Traynor? Yeah, he wasn't going anywhere. She said he beat her? You're sure about that?"

"Swear it in court, I'm that sure. Sooner he's behind bars, the better."

"He seems very upset about her death."

"Upset about getting caught is more like it. I'd like to break every finger on his fancy little hands." Ralph Jordan smashed his own hand down on the bar.

Shultz shifted uneasily. The lab report on Elisa Reynals had mentioned bruises. Joshua Traynor's sensitive fingers, what kind of force would they have exerted as a fist? Or was this just another one of Elisa's stories, tailored to Ralph Jordan; make the boss feel sorry for you, then ask for a raise.

"What about this guy Paul? You don't think they might have still been seeing each other?"

"Paul? Hell, no. He's cruising around the Caribbean. Probably had a couple of babes since September." Jordan turned his head away and sneezed.

"He does charters, you say?"

"Yeah, fancy ones. Rich people who don't want to be bothered with a yacht hire him to cruise them around. Nice life, if you ask me." Jordan sneezed again.

"You have a cold, Mr. Jordan?" Shultz asked solicitously.

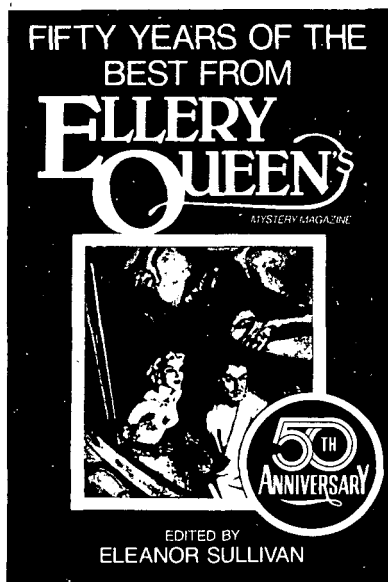
"No, an allergy. Place is full of dust catchers." Jordan waved his hand at the fishnets draped on the walls. He shrugged. "Tourists go for this stuff."

"Yes, I'm sure they do," Shultz agreed.

Dean Woodward leaned back in his chair, amazed.

"A penthouse apartment! Why, no, our scholarships would hardly cover that. Elisa Reynals was on scholarship, and so is Joshua Traynor. I don't know who told you he had a trust fund; his father and mother are both schoolteachers in Attleboro, and he's one of five kids. No one here would think twice about the address because a lot of our students live on Beacon

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Street. Basement apartments, rooming houses, that sort of thing. Of course, Elisa Reynals dropped out of school second term, so perhaps she was—

"Dropped out?"

"Yes. It was really too bad, she was a fine pianist, but after the first couple of months, she just seemed to lose interest. Stopped coming to class." He thumbed the manila folder that was lying on his desk. "When you said you were coming, I pulled her record. You understand, I don't really know all the students personally. Of course, a student's record is confidential, but I can tell you this, she definitely did not re-enroll in February."

"What about Traynor?"

"Oh, he's doing fine . . . or he was anyway until this . . . I do hope you can get it cleared up. It must be awfully hard on the boy."

Schultz looked at the report on the fingerprints found in Elisa Reynals' bedroom. The victim's all over the place naturally; none of Joshua Traynor's, but then any nine-year-old knew enough to wear gloves when committing a crime; a few of the cleaning lady's; and a number of unidentified prints; all belonging to the same person. There were so many of these prints about that it seemed

incredible any killer would have been so careless.

"You interviewed Mrs. Milligan; she strike you as the killer type?"

"We aren't that desperate, are we?" Meese bit into his jelly doughnut, spraying strawberry jam on his cheek. "She practically went into cardiac arrest from discovering the body. She's got ten kids, is married to a fireman in Dorchester, and goes to mass every morning at six."

"What'd you do, give her the third degree?"

"Once she got over being hysterical, she wouldn't stop talking."

"How about the possibility that she's a religious fanatic who didn't like the idea of cleaning up for two kids living in sin?"

"Shultz, you been watching television again? Mrs. Milligan was dropped off by Mr. Milligan at exactly noon. He parks the car and is getting the rug shampooer out to help his wife do the rugs when she comes tearing out of the building screaming. By this time it is three past twelve and there are at least six witnesses." Meese reached for another doughnut.

"Okay, okay, so the cleaning lady's out. What about the theory of a crazy? No reports of strange characters between ten and twelve last Saturday?"

"No stranger than any other Saturday on Beacon Street."

Shultzzy sighed. "I suppose the only hope of pinning it on a crazy is if he strikes again. Damn, give me one of those doughnuts, Bill, I need the sugar. Here I am hoping that someone else will get knocked off to give us a few more clues."

Shultzzy bit into the last jelly doughnut. Meese noted with some awe that she ate without once dribbling or squirting jelly.

"We still got either Traynor or Mr. X," Meese pointed out.

"Yeah, but if Mr. X is a crazy, without a record, who didn't know her and whom no one saw, that leaves us in great shape. Let's go back to Beacon Street," Shultzzy said suddenly.

"What for?"

"I want another look at that piano."

**"N**o wonder it was out of tune," Shultzzy commented. "It's amazing it would even plunk. Very ingenious arrangement."

Meese stared in wonder at the white baggies stuffed into the piano's false bottom.

"Quite a day's pay there, wouldn't you say, Bill?"

"Enough to cover the rent, that's for sure."

"Well, this may explain why, but it doesn't tell us who."

"What about Traynor? If he was in on it, maybe he just got tired of splitting it with her. Or maybe she was kicking him out, and he killed her."

"And left all this for us to find?"

"Who says he thought we'd find it? Someone left it, though."

"And someone will be back for it, you can bet on that. Now, what do you think? Do we tell Narcotics about this, or do we wait? Keep the apartment sealed until we're ready to do our own little stakeout?"

Meese smiled. "Sounds good to me."

They were both remembering the murder conviction they'd lost when Narcotics decided to grant immunity to their collar for the names of drug dealers. The longer Narcotics was out of the case, the better.

"We got a new name for your mystery man." Mary Lee Kingsley looked up from her computer. "Dan Paulini. I been doing a little checking on him. You got a minute?"

"Several." Shultzzy waved Mary Lee into the office.

"He was arrested a couple of times for possession but always got off, technicalities mostly. Had a good lawyer. However, he was jailed a couple of nights in Cohasset. Not for drugs but for beating up his girlfriend."



One Melody Hayes. Broke her nose, which apparently got her mad enough to call the cops. He was teaching sailing at the yacht club. When he got out of jail, he came up to the North Shore, shortened his name, and somehow . . .” Mary Lee’s eyebrow lifted. “Got enough money to buy himself a very nice yacht. I took the liberty of calling the police in St. Thomas . . .”

“Take all the liberties you want, Mary Lee,” Shultzzy smiled.

“According to them, Paul’s boat slipped out of the harbor a few weeks ago . . . at night. They were very curious to know why we were interested. Seems Paul flew up to Massachusetts an awful lot this winter in a friend’s private plane. Paul let it be known he was just going up to visit his girlfriend in Boston, but given the fact that his friend has a great deal of money and no visible employment . . .”

“Yes, indeed, Mary Lee, we get the picture. Except there’s still one little detail I don’t understand. Why would a smart cookie like that leave fingerprints all over the bedroom?”

“Maybe he heard the cleaning lady coming and panicked. Hid out on the patio and, when she went for the police, got out the back stairs,” Meese said.

“Athletic type, is he, Mary Lee?”

“Sounds like he could be. He’s six three, one hundred eighty pounds, thirty years old, curly brown hair. Not bad looking even in a mug shot. I’d say he could probably move fast enough if he had to.”

“Next question is where is he now?”

“That’s easy. I’ve been checking marinas. He’s at the Charles River Basin.”

“Bless you, my child.”

**D**an Paul tied up at the Charles River dock. It had been a good day on the ocean, but he was feeling antsy. Last night the yellow police tapes had still been up, but maybe tonight he’d get lucky. Still, it wouldn’t do to leave before dark. A stocky woman moved down the gangplank in his direction, followed by an equally thickset man. Dan Paul drew back automatically. He knew the look of police officers.

“Mr. Paul, or is it Mr. Paulini?”

Dan Paul screwed up his mouth sourly, but what was the use of lying.

“Either,” he replied.

Back at the station, Paul had a lot to say; none of it incriminating as he was quick to point out.

“Sure, I was still seeing Elisa. I’d wait until Traynor went out,

and then I'd come up, stay in Elisa's room. She had him trained so he'd never come in the bedroom without her permission. It wasn't too bad, really; we had our own bathroom, and there was the patio. Besides, I was never there that long. I can't be away from the boat much in the winter."

"Were you aware that Elisa Reynals was sleeping with Joshua Traynor?"

Dan Paul smirked.

"If you want to call it that. She said he was pathetic in bed. Anyway, she only slept with him in the beginning so she could keep him on the hook. All Traynor was there for was so her parents wouldn't wonder about the fancy apartment, which I was paying for, by the way, and so they'd stop asking if she were still seeing me. Lissa figured that if they thought she was living with Mr. Clean-cut America and going to school, they'd forget about me. Then she was going to break up with Traynor, tell them he'd been beating on her, and that I'd come back and asked her to marry me. She thought that would make them fall all over me with hugs and kisses." Paul shrugged at the disbelief evident on Shultzzy's face. "I know it sounds nuts, but Elisa was a romantic. She wanted a big wedding with all

her family there. I didn't think it'd work, frankly, but I went along with it."

Amazing, Shultzzy thought, at all the men going along with what Elisa wanted. All except one.

"Yet a month ago she hinted to her parents that she and Traynor were going to be engaged?"

"Yeah, that's right. That was part of her plan. She was going to tell them this month that she was pregnant and that he'd refused to marry her and that I would. What a sweetie pie I'd be, right? Actually, I had to hand it to Lissa, that's probably the only way her old man would ever stomach me. Anything would be better than his little darling as an unwed mother."

"Was she pregnant?" Shultzzy knew the answer but wondered if Paul did.

"No... We figured a little miscarriage might be in order, after the wedding. Lissa didn't want to have kids yet."

"How about you?"

"Me?" Paul laughed. "Never was soon enough for me."

"For a man whose fiancée was just murdered, you don't seem very upset, Mr. Paul."

"I'm upset. If you don't put that little Traynor bastard behind bars, I'll show you just how upset I am."

"Joshua Traynor was not in

the apartment when Elisa was murdered. How about you, Mr. Paul? A little strange, isn't it, that you've been hiding out ever since the murder?"

"Well, what do you expect? I knew I'd been there the night before, my fingerprints must be all over the place. I've got—" Paul stopped.

"A record. Drugs . . . and beating up your last girlfriend. According to Mr. Reynals, you'd done the same to Lissa, and according to the autopsy, there were a number of bruises on her back and legs, not as fresh as the strangulation but—"

"She fell on the ice in March. She was always falling."

"Was she? Funny, no one else mentioned anything about her falling."

"No one else knew her like I did."

Shultz pulled a package of gum out of her desk drawer. She needed something to chew on. Nails would have been preferable, but she settled for Juicy Fruit. She offered the last stick to Meese, who grimly popped it into his cheek.

"You say you were at the apartment the night before? Where were you on Saturday?"

"I left about midnight. Had to sneak out because the Traynor creep came home an hour early. Lissa threw a fit and sent him to his room. I stayed on the

boat all night. Lissa was supposed to meet me around noon to go sailing. When she didn't come, I figured she'd decided to go shopping. She'd said if she wasn't there by noon to go without her. She'd seen some sales she was crazy to get to. Then when I got in around six I heard the news on the radio . . ." Dan Paul stopped. "I couldn't believe it . . ." His voice softened. "I've been sailing every day since . . . didn't seem like there was much else I could do."

"You know a Ralph Jordan?"

Paul looked surprised at the change of subject.

"Yeah. He runs a place in Marblehead. Elisa played piano there."

"He's a friend of yours?"

"We know each other. I go into his bar a lot when I'm in Marblehead."

"Jordan said Elisa broke up with you because you were beating her."

"He did? Well, that shows you how much he knew, since we never broke up."

"Of course, the only person who can vouch for that is you."

"It's the truth." Dan Paul was clearly upset this time.

"That may be something you'll have to prove." Shultz paused, giving Paul plenty of time to contemplate the stickiness of his position.

The clock ticked for several

minutes before she broke the silence once again.

"I'm asking the harbormaster to secure your boat, Mr. Paul. I suggest you take a room and keep us up to date on your whereabouts." Snapping her gum, Shultzzy nodded towards the door.

A considerably chastened Dan Paul left in search of a hotel room.

Shultzzy clicked the intercom. "Put a tail on Mr. Paul pronto, Mary Lee. We want to know everything, especially his telephone calls."

**S**hultzzy looked at the neatly typed list of numbers and names the next afternoon and quirked an eyebrow at Bill and Mary Lee.

"Looks like Mr. Paul made quite a few calls to Marblehead. And just who was he calling, Mary Lee?"

"William McGuire, owner of a Mercedes dealership. Dr. Rod Sheldon, a high-priced orthodontist. Harold Funicelli, manager of the marina next to The Blue Parrot. I thought it might be interesting to see if they were ever in The Blue Parrot."

"Mary Lee, I can see that you're after my job. Okay, what did you find out?"

"I called last night asking for

them, and the waitress said to call back on Friday. Apparently that's their night out with the boys, and they always end up at The Blue Parrot."

"You don't say. So, Mr. Paul wanted to know what was going on at Jordan's Friday night. I wonder why he was so interested. What about this number?" Shultzzy's finger stopped at the bottom of the list.

"That one was unlisted, but I found out who it belongs to . . . Ralph Jordan." Mary Lee's smile broadened.

"Well, well, well. Very good work, Mary Lee. What do you think, Bill? It looks like Mr. Paul and Mr. Jordan had quite a chat. Twenty minutes. Wish we could have had a bug on that. Now why do you suppose Paul wanted to talk to Jordan?"

Mary Lee coughed discreetly.

"Mary Lee, are you holding out on us?"

"Give me time, Shultzzy. It just happens that the night desk clerk . . . well, he lifted up the phone while the two of them were talking. You notice Paul called Jordan around two in the morning, and this clerk, well, he shouldn't have, but . . ." Mary Lee raised her own eyebrow ever so slightly.

"We understand. Just take it out of petty cash, Mary Lee."

"He didn't have a chance to hear much, but he did hear

Paul tell Jordan that he'd get the stuff as soon as the coast was clear. Jordan said he hoped so because he'd had to go elsewhere and it wasn't as good and he'd had complaints."

"Well, perhaps we should help clear the coast for Mr. Paul and Mr. Jordan. Wouldn't want any inferior goods flooding the North Shore drug scene now, would we?"

**O**n Friday night, Shultz quietly unlocked the door to Elisa Reynals' penthouse. All evidence of the police's occupation had been removed. The word had gone out to all interested parties that the movers would be there in the morning.

"So, how long do you think we have to wait?" Meese asked, swishing the drapes, scouting out hiding places.

"Jordan closes up at one. I'd say between two and three. Better have our coffee and doughnuts now."

"You're sure they'll come?"

"With half a million in coke in that piano and Paul thinking we're about to arrest him, are you kidding?"

Meese smiled. "Nah, I just don't want to be disappointed. I was supposed to start my yoga class tonight."

It was exactly two thirty when

the apartment door opened. Dan Paul flicked on the lights, moved across to the piano, pushed the button that opened the false bottom, and slid out the Baggies. Stuffing them into canvas seabags, Paul loaded his cargo with the swiftness of an expert. When the buzzer announced the presence of Jordan in the lobby, the piano was its innocent self again.

From their vantage points behind the drapes, Shultz and Meese had no trouble identifying Ralph Jordan. There was no mistaking that bulbous red nose. They both stifled the urge to jump out as soon as Jordan reached in his pocket for the money. Talk, please talk, Shultz prayed.

Dan Paul set the seabags down at Jordan's feet and, taking the envelope, opened it to check its contents.

"What's the matter, you don't trust me all of a sudden?" Jordan asked nervously.

"Should I?" Paul snapped. "What's this I hear about you telling the police I beat up Lissa? Doesn't exactly help my case any."

"Hey, I'm sorry, but I thought that was what you guys wanted people to think, that you were split."

"Split, yeah, but not that I beat her. Hell, it makes it look like I came back and killed her.



I am now Suspect Number One, so maybe you could tell the truth about Lissa and me still going together this winter, Ralphie. Tell them you knew we were planning to get married."

"Wait a minute, Dan, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"We're not supposed to know each other that well, right? You wouldn't want the cops to start making connections."

"You can tell them Lissa confided in you the last time you saw her."

"I already told them what she said."

"Well, tell them you just happened to remember something else."

Jordan hesitated.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"You suppose so? You don't sound very eager to help, Ralph. You want me to go to jail?"

"No, no, of course not."

"Then you call up the cops tomorrow and tell them that Lissa and me were a real happy couple."

"Sure. Okay, Dan." Jordan started toward the door, hauling the bags. As he reached for the doorknob, Dan Paul grabbed him in a stranglehold.

"You better make up your mind to be sure, Ralph, or there's a little piece of information I picked up this week that I might

let the cops have."

"What are you talking about?" Jordan gasped.

"I'm talking about just how strung out you were Friday night. Just how bad you needed a fix. So bad you drove into Boston on Saturday morning, didn't you? What happened, Ralph? Lissa didn't have enough to satisfy you? How much coke you have to stuff up that nose of yours?"

"What are you, nuts? I wouldn't—"

"Oh, yeah, well, I got a couple of fellows, Ralph, who say you were crazy enough Friday night to do anything. And they'll be happy to tell the cops what they told me. Now, I told them to be quiet about it because I know you'd squeal your guts out, but you don't give me an alibi, Ralph, I'm going to change my mind."

"You're crazy if you believed that, you'd—"

"I'd kill you. I would, except that if I kill you, my alibi's gone, so, much as I would like to kill you..." Dan Paul tightened his grip around Ralph's neck "...I am going to have to let you live... unless you don't cooperate. That was a very stupid thing for you to do, Ralph. I loved her. If I weren't facing a murder charge, you'd be floating face up in the Charles right now."

"I didn't mean to. It was an accident, honest," Jordan wheezed. "All she gave me was a little of her own. I told her to get the stuff you were going to sell me, but she said she couldn't. Said she'd promised you never to show me where you hide it. I just kept shaking her and then she started to scream so I pressed harder. It was an accident—"

It was just as well for Ralph Jordan that Shultz and Meese chose that moment to step out from behind the drapes.

The Narcotics Squad happily tallied up the cargo that Meese and Shultz delivered along with Dan Paul at three thirty. Ralph Jordan, however, went

directly to Homicide despite Lieutenant Delaney's complaints about all the information they could have gotten out of him.

Shultz had smiled sweetly and said, "I don't think so, Delaney. My sources tell me that if Jordan isn't sent up for this murder, he won't be around to tell anyone anything."

Dan Paul whistled softly.

A few weeks later, the strains of Liszt's "Consolation" wafted through the Conservatory's auditorium. Joshua Traynor's elegant fingers rippled over the flute. Shultz Winchell in the front row gazed at those fingers, very pleased with herself.

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FICTION

# Speaking Terms

by Molly  
MacRae

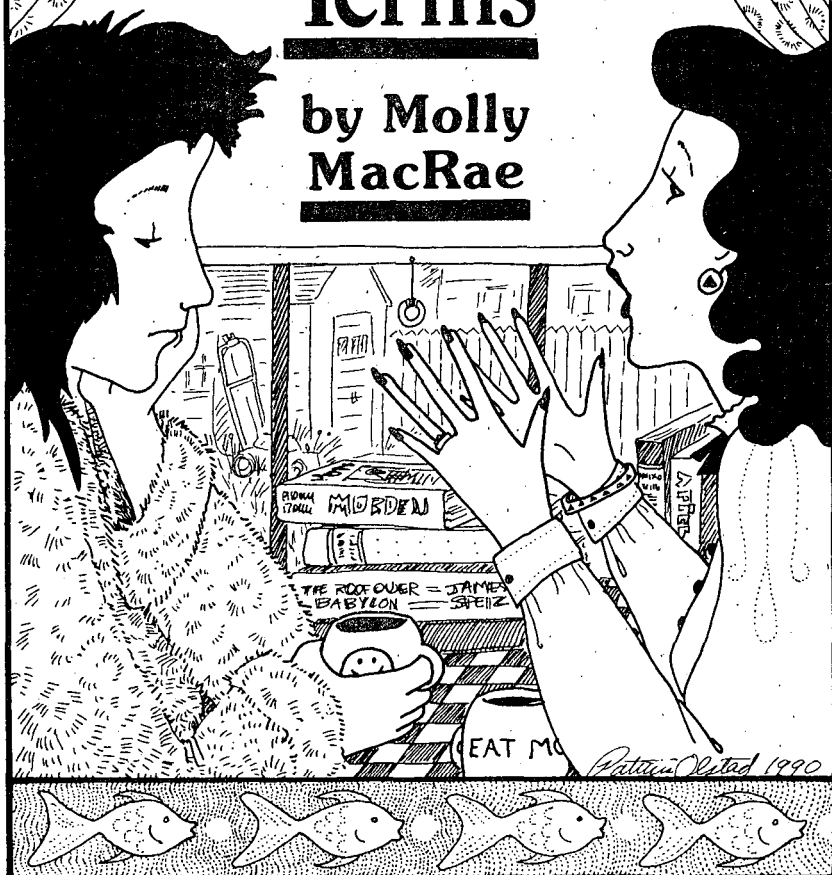


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**M**y sister Bitsy and I were on speaking terms. Which was a shame because speaking with Bitsy takes up so much of my time. She can't confine herself to the basics of any single conversation. She has to back and fill and digress and impress and after awhile I would just rather be doing something else; cleaning the cat pan, for instance.

Bitsy came around one morning and threw herself down at the kitchen table, flushed and breathing erratically but without a strand of hair askew or an eyelash smudged. I ran my fingers through my own as yet uncombed tendrils and handed her a cup of coffee in a mug sporting the slogan, "Eat More Possum." Bitsy didn't notice, so I knew she was in a bad way and my morning was probably shot.

"Margaret! I've had the most hellish experience!" Bitsy has a rather shrill voice and she speaks with exclamation points. "All the goldfish are gone from our lily pond!" She paused for a breath, then blinked at me. "Oh, Margaret, you're not dressed yet."

"No." I try to keep my end of these conversations short.

"But, my goodness, it's ten o'clock."

"I know."

"Well, aren't you afraid

someone will drop by without calling first and see you like that?"

I looked at her pointedly, but the irony of what she'd said was lost on her.

"I should think your business would suffer," she streamed on. "Surely even people who buy used books expect a certain amount of decorum, even if you aren't upscale with one of those cute little shops downtown. The one on the corner of Maple and Goodwin is for rent, by the way. I mean, a conservative suit or a sensible shirtwaist in a subdued paisley might attract..."

"What does Rodney say?" I like to deflect her before she really gets going about my business, which I figure is none of her business.

"Well, Rodney went to that Dress for Success seminar..."

"No, Bitsy, about the fish."

Her face crumpled and she wailed, "Rodney is the one who did it!" Then she pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve, waved it vaguely about, and blew her nose delicately into it. I was fascinated. Where does she pick up these gestures?

"Rodney killed the fish?" I asked, staring at her. This was also fascinating. I'd never thought of Bitsy's rotund husband as anything more than an insurance salesman. Had he stalked the fish relentlessly and

dragged them out of the pond one by one, leaving them to gasp and gargle on the lawn? Or had he slyly poisoned them all in one mad second of abandon? The mind boggled.

"Well, Bitsy," I pitched my voice low, trying to sound solemn and concerned. She is, after all, my sister. "What exactly happened?" But I kept picturing fat Rodney furtively casing the fishpond.

"They've been disappearing a few at a time," she hiccuped. "Every morning I go out and ring my little brass bell to let them know I'm coming to feed them. I trained them to do that myself. It's the way the Japanese do, you know, with their Koi. And the fish all come up blowing little bubbles, only every morning now more and more of them have been missing and this morning they're all gone!" Bitsy cried then, because she is very sensitive. Which is a kind way of putting it.

And I sat wondering what this meant for the future of her marriage and for the future of my spare room.

"What are you going to do?" I finally asked, not without some unease.

"Oh, I don't know." She shuddered dramatically. "Oh, I just don't, well, I just don't think I could bear going home at this point!"

"Cousin Leona has that lovely guest room," I said.

"No! I couldn't possibly stay with Leona! She has that house so crowded with dusty froufrou, and all she ever talks about are those damned African violets of hers. Do you really think she won that first prize ribbon or did she pick it up at a garage sale?"

I'd forgotten that Bitsy and our elderly cousin were *not* on speaking terms. Something to do with a falling out at the Garden Club Flower Show.

"Bitsy, maybe it was some dumb kids playing a nasty joke who took the fish out of the pond."

"No, Margaret. You know very well the only children in the neighborhood are toddlers" (she actually refers to small children as toddlers) "and we have that six foot privacy fence around the back yard."

"But think about it, Bitsy, why would Rodney kill the fish?"

"I think Rodney has always hated that goldfish pond," she wailed.

"Oh." Then I thought of something else. "Has Rodney been gardening lately?" I asked.

"What has that got to do with anything?" she sniffled.

"Fish make great fertilizer."

"Oh, Margaret! How can you be so unfeeling?" But I could see that something had occurred to

her. Her mouth snapped shut and her eyes narrowed.

Bitsy's mind at work is an unnerving sight, so I got up to make another pot of coffee. Then, being not as insensitive as I wish I sometimes were, I offered Bitsy the spare room.

"Oh, Margaret, you're sure you don't mind?" But she was already arranging herself more comfortably and putting her sweater proprietarily over the back of the chair.

"No. I'll just have to move a few books around in there." I wondered if I could move them around enough to find the bed. I make a reasonable living dealing in used and rare books, and my inventory has grown to the point that books have spilled over into most of the rooms of my small house. I know where all the books are, it's the furniture underneath I sometimes can't locate.

"Make yourself at home this evening. Gene's coming by. We thought we'd go see a movie," I said.

"Well, I'm sure if you explain it to him he'll understand why you can't go."

"What?" I stopped sloshing water around in the sink, not sure I'd heard that quite right.

"You can't leave me alone! I need someone to talk to! What if Rodney comes by looking for me?"

"Oh, Bitsy."

"Margaret!"

Oh, hell.

A scratching noise came at the screen door. The door opened and banged shut again. Bitsy looked around to see who had come in but missed him because he's short, being only an average-sized cat. When she turned back to the table, he was standing on it looking her in the eye.

"Yeee!" she screeched, upsetting the poor old guy. He jumped back and put his foot in her coffee cup. Luckily the coffee was cold by then or he might have flung it in her face.

"What a horrible looking cat! How did it get in? Get it off the table! You'll have to sterilize the cup!" she said.

The cat turned his back on her and proceeded to bathe himself in the middle of the table. I opened the refrigerator. He stopped mid-lick and hopped down for his breakfast.

"He's a stray," I said. "His name is Old Geezer."

"He looks diseased. Some of his fur is missing. His ears are flat. And why is he all wet, it isn't even raining."

Have I mentioned that Bitsy doesn't like cats?

I don't make a point of defending myself or anyone else to Bitsy, but Old Geezer couldn't begin to do it for himself, not with her attitude.



"He's old, Bitsy. He looks on this as his retirement home. His legs are wet because there's dew on the grass."

She swiveled around to peer at the back yard. Her lips thinned at the sight of grass unmowed for several weeks. "Is your mower broken?" she asked tightly.

"No." I could have told her that I'm slothful and that not mowing the grass goes along with not being dressed by ten A.M. and pandering to frowzy fleabags. But Bitsy hates it when I'm honest about myself before she is.

"If that cat can let itself in, how do you keep it out?" she asked.

"I don't."

Then Gene dropped in. Bitsy likes Gene as much as unmowed grass or cats. She must see some cosmic connection between them. I could make a guess that what she finds detestable in all three is their unpredictability. To her, that is a moral fault. Bitsy needs consistency and routine. The unexpected is unpleasant and unwanted. Where I see a mass of delicate wildflowers drifting through my yard, she sees unkempt grass and weeds. Where a cat sees a dust mote that needs wrestling to the ground and all over the living room furniture, she sees disruption and

unnecessary commotion. Where Gene saw the chance to rid himself of a high-pressure job designing big buildings he hated, she saw self-destruction and personal failure.

"Oh, hi, Bitsy." The smile on Gene's face deflated a little when he saw her. "How are you?"

"My fish were killed!" she snapped, glaring at him as though he were a conspirator in their deaths.

I think Gene visibly jumped back, though not as dramatically as Geezer had when Bitsy first addressed him. "Gee," he said, "I'm sorry."

"Bitsy thinks Rodney did it," I said.

"No kidding, Rodney?" Gene came over and put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a good morning peck on the cheek.

"Well," said Bitsy, "I see you two have other things on your minds. I will go across and speak to Cousin Leona."

"Really?" Ever hopeful me.

"Something has occurred to me, Margaret, and I'm going to take a closer look at those African violets of hers. They've been looking particularly healthy lately." She gave wide berth to Old Geezer, then stopped and looked from the cat to Gene. Geezer had beached himself on the rag rug in front

of the stove and was scratching a flea. Gene was leaning against the counter, one hand vaguely rubbing his beard.

"You like cats, don't you, Gene?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," Gene replied.

"Well, Margaret, that solves that problem. Gene can take the cat to the movies this evening." She sailed on past and out the front door.

We listened for the purposeful slam that accompanies Bitsy's exits. Then I told Gene about the change in our evening's plans and how understanding Bitsy was sure he would be about it. Which he wasn't particularly until I pointed out that she wasn't here now and I was. So we focused on that bright spot in our lives for awhile, after which Gene straggled off to work with more than a twinkle in his eye and I opened my doors to the new business day.

Bitsy arrived back sometime shortly after noon. I told her there was tunafish for sandwiches in the refrigerator. It was an unfortunate suggestion from her point of view, but it did stifle conversation.

She ate peanut butter and sat, her eyes fixed on the square of lawn visible through the kitchen window, muttering to herself. I caught the word "bats"

but nothing more. Muttering "bats" after a chat with Cousin Leona isn't extraordinary, and though maybe I should have asked Bitsy how it had gone, I didn't have several hours to kill.

I went back to work, locating Thurber's *The Thirteen Clocks* for somebody's grandmother, selling *The Happy Hollisters* and the *Whistle Pig Mystery* to two small boys, and in between packing a box with half a dozen P. G. Wodehouse first editions for shipment to a customer in Michigan. Then, before I forgot, I went to excavate the bed in the spare room, being careful not to confuse my sophisticated retrieval system.

The lawn mower started up. Glancing out the window I saw Bitsy attacking the back yard. From the look on her face she was a woman with a mission. I left her to it.

I can't say I didn't enjoy my evening with Bitsy. We made popcorn and sat at either end of the sofa, facing each other, eating it out of big bowls and laughing, something we hadn't done together since we were teenagers. We hadn't done it often then, either. Her bout with the back yard had left her in good spirits, probably deluding her into thinking she was making progress towards her

lifelong goal of setting me straight. I saw no harm in letting her dream on.

She even kept her feet up on the sofa when Gene showed up with *Bringing Up Baby* on tape and sat down between us. I think she was encouraged because he didn't bring a six-pack with him and he kept his shoes on.

Then Rodney arrived. Bitsy's mouth got small. She stood up so she could turn her back on him.

"Evening, Gene, Margaret," said Rodney. He pulled a handkerchief out of his sans-a-belt pocket and wiped his forehead. He took several deep breaths. He studied the floor in front of his toes, which came into view just beyond the edge of his belly. Then he raised his head and pursed his lips momentarily before speaking to his wife.

He was masterful. I hadn't known what it takes to make an insurance salesman. But Rodney has it. And it worked on Bitsy. Within minutes they were clinging to each other, the near-wreckage of their wedded bliss sweeping past, forgotten.

"Oh, Rodney, I knew it couldn't be you," Bitsy sniffled into his shoulder. "Margaret must be right, it must have been some nasty children."

"That's all right, honey pot. You know I like watching you

feed the little critters. In fact, I bought you some more. They're not very big yet, but they'll grow. There's the prettiest little orange fantail with white spots, and a couple of those gold pop-eyes you like. You come on home now and give them names."

"Oh, Rodney."

They spooned their way out the front door. Gene and I followed and we all stood on the porch in the mellow light of the moon while Bitsy went on saying goodbye. Someone should have taken a picture then of the four of us standing there exuding warmth, companionship, pleasure, and used it as an advertisement for some cozy beverage, or saved it for five or ten minutes to give us a few laughs after what happened next.

As we smiled and the men shook hands again and Bitsy was saying something about artichoke hearts, Old Geezer trotted up the front steps. He dropped a small parcel on Gene's shoe and gave his old cat's version of a mew.

The crickets ceased to chirp. Ourselves silent, as one, we bent forward to stare at Gene's foot. We focused on the orange body with fantail and white spots nestled there on his laces. Bitsy was the only one to comment.

"YEEeeee!" she said.

Geezer leaped straight up into Gene's arms and clung there, appalled.

Between finger and thumb, Rodney picked up the fish. He held it up and looked from Gene to me to Old Geezer, who had calmed slightly and was shaking, one by one, his wet legs.

"Margaret!" shrieked Bitsy. "I . . ."

I cut her off. "I think Gene and Geezer make a handsome couple, don't you?"

"They'd better make it a permanent arrangement!" she snapped. And she and Rodney stalked off into the night.

Leona tottered over from next door while Gene and Geezer were getting into Gene's car.

"Was that Bitsy who just left?" she asked.

"Mmm," I answered.

"I've got something for her." She produced a plastic bag from her apron pocket. "It's bat guano," she said. "I use it on my African violets. Thought she might like some, but the way she rushed out muttering this afternoon I didn't have a chance to give it to her. What's Gene

doing with that cat?"

Gene was trying to get Old Geezer to sit down in the passenger seat of his beautiful dark blue Lamborghini. Geezer wanted to stand in the driver's seat with his paws on the steering wheel.

"They look good together," said Leona. "They both have a motheaten look about them, but they look damned handsome in that car."

"You're right," I said.

"You should spend more time with him," she said, looking at me slyly. "I like him. How about giving Bitsy this bat guano next time you see her. She isn't speaking to me, apparently."

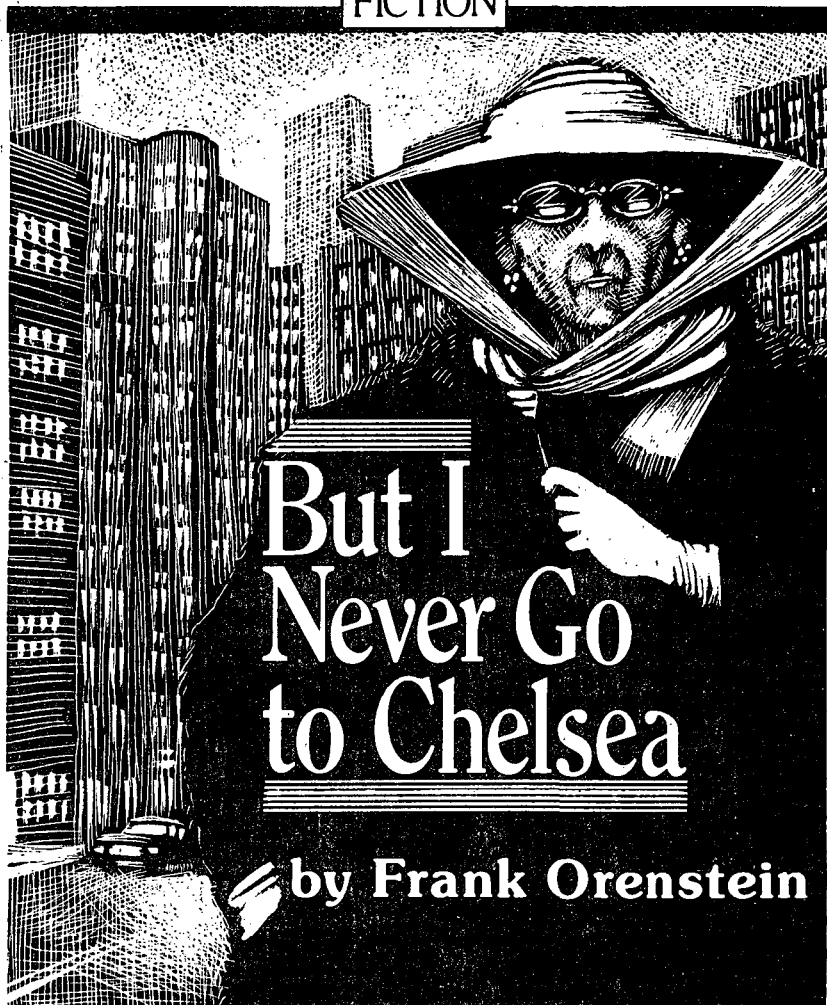
"Actually, Cousin Leona, I don't think she's speaking to me right now, either."

Leona looked back at Gene, who was still explaining things to the cat.

"Hmph. You've got time on your hands, then. Goodnight, dear."

She gave me a little push towards the car. She stayed to wave as the three of us drove off.

FICTION



# But I Never Go to Chelsea

by Frank Orenstein

I'm almost never in New York these days. Memories of the place you start out in, thoughts of those first days of freedom away from Mom and Dad, should be sweet, perhaps bittersweet and even sad, but still something to bring a pleasant ache to the heart and a self-indulgent smile to the lips. But not shame, not doubt. On the few occasions when I'm in New York—a scholarly meeting, a major art exhibit that won't make it to Kansas City or St. Louis—I

Illustration by Tim Foley

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generally take a room in Midtown, near the meetings, east of Park. By staying close, except for sorties to the theater or the museums, I can afford the cheap luxury of remembering what it was like in that part of town over fifty years ago. Lexington Avenue, for instance.

Lexington was a kind of a small town Main Street back then. Most of the buildings were modest. There were no cheap and glitzy hotels, but there was a lively mix of little stores, neighborhood stores. There were hardware stores and there were clothing stores that emphatically did not cater to the aggressively young. You could get your hair done without namebrand beauticians breathing at you, and there were small bars and diners and a mix of unassuming places comfortably guaranteed to carry nothing designed to be passé in six months. The words boutique and trendy were still blessedly uninvented. It's changed now, of course.

But I never go to Chelsea.

We had all come to the city from different places in those prewar years. It's a mark of my age now that I keep forgetting I have to specify which prewar. I mean pre-World War II; Korea and Vietnam didn't impinge in the same way on my generation. There wasn't any place else to go, not then. Washington was a village, Los Angeles a joke, and Chicago a second best. Boston was a temple of insularity and Philadelphia had opted to cease to exist, while San Francisco was just beginning. No, it was New York or nothing.

I was in the Art Students League; I was going to be a sculptor. I loved pounding at clay and chipping at stone and working off whatever tensions had piled up in me by directing them toward creating something, and I think I could have been good at it. And please note that I say I "was going" to be a sculptor. Not like the kids these days who are too sunk in infantilism to work and wait. Instead, they say "I am" a sculptor, and the notion that they might have to struggle to get there brings on fits of rage. Anyway there I was, young enough to hope, but mature enough to know I had to study, a goodlooking kid, maybe a bit skinny and hopelessly lacking in the bosom department, but with a gangly sort of charm. Secretly, I thought I was the Katharine Hepburn type.

I met the others because we were in the same rooming house in Chelsea, the catch basin for the overflow of newcomers who couldn't squeeze into Greenwich Village at a price they could afford. That's how you meet when you're young, casually, the easy way. My real name was Jeanette, but I billed myself as Janine. I suspect we all



took names that symbolized the glamor of our current lives and removed us from what we saw as our mundane pasts. And there was Rolf, who was studying at Columbia and was going to be a poet; T. S. Eliot and Auden were his heroes. (I never get requests for Eliot these days from the few students who actually read enough to come into my library for something more than books on business administration, and what circulation Auden gets I suspect has more to do with his sex life than with his poetry.)

Speaking of sex, which we did a lot of in those days, Rolf and I became lovers. We knew it would terminate in marriage, even without talking about it, because that was what sex was all about back then. Sex broke the rules, which provided an extra thrill, yet it was almost innocent, not like today when anything less than a group orgy of assorted perversions scarcely merits a comment. I think most of us felt that it was something we had discovered, even invented, while our parents' generation had indulged a few times during their married lives, once for each child, and then abruptly quit on turning forty.

Rhonda and Joe were part of the rooming house gang, too. Rhonda, whose real name I always suspected was Rhoda, was studying dance, and she never let us forget it. She was forever performing little steps, stretching, bending, turning, and generally shoving that disgustingly high and mighty chest at every man in sight. I asked her one time, "What do you pump those things up with, hydrogen?" She didn't particularly like that, and told me I had a nasty tongue. Maybe I did, for some people, but I thought I was clever.

Joe was just Joe, and if he hadn't been in the same house, I doubt that he would ever have been part of our bunch. He was a graduate student in mathematics, of all things, which made him, to our youthful snobbery, a lower form of life. But he was a real Joe, a chubby, overfed Joe, and I always regretted cutting off some inane remark he had made about Brancusi, who was my favorite sculptor, by snapping, "Oh, shut up, you stupid bald bastard!"

"That's not funny," Rhonda was helpfully quick to point out.

True, it wasn't up to my usual standard, and what with Joe's hairline on a rapid ascent for one so young, it was even a little cruel, but I wasn't about to take literary criticism from the brainless ballerina. (Which was what I called her when Rolf and I were alone.) "Well, I think it is. And anyway, who asked you?" I said with more anger than wit.

"Okay, you two," Rolf said. "Pistols in Central Park at dawn, anyone? Or else can it. It's too hot for this."

I remember that heat. We often repaired to the roof with a bottle of gin and a can of grapefruit juice. Parents always thought their children in New York on limited budgets lived on peanut butter and white bread, but the truth is that, wicked as we thought we were, we would pretend that gin and grapefruit were the staff of life. Always, in the warm weather, on the roof. Rooftop living was a trademark of summer in New York before air conditioning, and it was a lovely, lazy way to pass a late afternoon, when the shadows from the bigger buildings down the block, and there were always bigger buildings down the block, would provide some welcome shade. We'd sit on the parapets or on cushions we kept for dropping on the hot and gritty tarpaper.

Joe most often provided the gin, the rest of us the grapefruit juice, which seemed proper, since all except him were in the arts, artists, higher orders of being.

Since then I've developed a distaste for gin. It reminds me of Chelsea. The smell of it can make me sick, or sometimes afraid; it's hard to tell the difference, the feeling is so strong. And which comes first? Does being sick make me pant with fear, or is the fear so strong that it leaves me sick? And does it matter which? I don't think so: If a thousand devils or only one can dance on the head of a pin, there's still a devil to contend with. Anyway, these days there's always vodka.

Not, let me tell you, that I've given up my daily grog. I may be over seventy, God help me, but I couldn't stop shaking at the end of a workday without my martini, and please, no olive, no twist, and very little vermouth.

There were others who wandered into our company, stayed a while, and drifted out again, in the easygoing way that young people have. I can't recall their names, though when my eyes are shut I can see their faces, the girls typically with the long pageboy hairdos that curled under so gracefully at the nape of the neck, the boys with the crewcuts that were getting popular with the approach of war. But it was the four of us, Rolf and I, Rhonda and Joe, who were the nucleus. More correctly, Rolf was the nucleus, and without him there would have been no group, because he was an incredible combination of mischief and fun together with tenderness and a very special integrity. For instance:

His family name was Treddle, a ridiculous nothing of a name.

One time I said to him, "Rolf, if you changed your first name, why not your last, for heaven's sake? It sounds like a piece of machinery."

He said, "No thanks, baby."

"But why? That's just silly!"

"Well, it's hard to explain, but look at it this way. My first name is something somebody plastered on me when I was born, so it doesn't matter too much. But Treddle is what I am. It makes me part of my family, and I'd never do anything like that. It'd be like telling them to get lost, that I was cutting loose."

What he meant was that he loved them too much for anything even remotely like a symbolic rejection. He couldn't put it that way because "love" was a taboo word for a brittle Greenwich Village sophisticate, even if we were, technically, in Chelsea. That's what I mean by integrity. He wouldn't even have told anybody but me why he kept the ridiculous name, and I was proud of that.

He kept me in line, too, and I curbed that tongue I've got, at least much of the time, even though I thought—and still do—that the things I said were generally more clever than cruel. Like the way Joe used to eat too much, the greedy little porker, and then gasp for breath and say, every blessed time, "God, I ate too much!" One day I was ready for him, and using what I thought was an elegant drawl, I leaned over, patted his hand, and cooed, "Well, darling, at least no one can possibly say your eyes are bigger than your stomach." Everybody laughed, even though someone caught his breath sufficiently to cluck, "Ooh, Janine, you're just awful!"

I'll admit that after it happened I got a little uglier, as who wouldn't, and these days the kids on campus are leery enough to treat me with more respect than they give most of the fatuous idiots that teach their classes.

The other thing that changed afterwards was my dropping all pretense that I was a sculptor in the making. I couldn't take the uncertainty any more, the dependence on some arcane amalgam of instinct, skill, daring, and determination that it called for. My folks gave me the funds almost eagerly, and I switched to library school. Books are a certainty. They've got titles and authors and little numbers on the spine so that a body can tell where they belong in this life. They're orderly, regimented, and unambiguous.

Unless, of course, you open them. But I'm the kind of librarian who doesn't open them. Opening books is too untidy. And God knows the kids don't open them either, except for the few they have

to so they can get out and run toward the corporate chief executive officer chairs they see as the purpose of life.

It began to unravel one spring afternoon. We were in Rolf's place. I suppose that isn't even necessary to say because we were always in Rolf's place. The four of us as usual, and another couple that Rolf had picked up at one of his poetry seminars. Later I realized that Rhonda had been looking strangely at Rolf, and while I know that hindsight sometimes rearranges the facts to fit the concept, I truly think I'm right about that. I do know that for once she kept that pneumatic butt and bosom in a chair instead of passing them around for general awe and admiration.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. "Your engine out of oil? Need your dipstick checked?"

She glared at me. Rolf put out a hand to stop me, but said nothing, so I went on. "Or maybe it's Joe's dipstick that we ought to check. Joe, how about that?"

Rhonda cried a little, unless she'd been sniffing at an onion she kept tucked in her brassiere. But then, she never wore a brassiere when she could get away with it. "Please stop it," she said.

"Please, Janine," Rolf said.

That did it, Rolf lining up with her. "What the heck did I do?" I asked. "Rhonda's always dancing around, shoving it at everybody, and you know it. Big deal."

Rhonda looked shrunken. Her head hung down a bit and the pageboy tumbled around it and nearly hid her face. "I'm pregnant," she whined. "I don't know what to do."

Now, you have to remember that in those years pregnancy out of wedlock was a shocker. And even worse, it was a problem. Abortion was illegal. With money, you could go to Cuba and have it done, or you could buy into a hospital through some bloodsucking doctor who would get you in as a Mrs. Whatsis whose life was endangered by her pregnancy. Or, without money, you could either go the back alley route or simply have the baby and face the fact that your life was over. And I mean over; one girl I knew, braver than most, had her baby, and when she presented the bill to her health insurance plan, she was informed in so many words, "We don't pay for bastards."

Well, Rhonda's announcement put me way out on a limb, busily sawing it off behind me. What could I do except go on fighting. "I wouldn't worry," I said soothingly. "I'm sure it's a mistake. After all, who would knock you up, dear?"

Rhonda looked at us all, but especially at Rolf. She burst into tears, and with her hands covering her face she ran out. Her tight little ass still looked sexy as she went, the bitch. Joe went after her.

The new girl stood up and faced me. "You're disgusting," she said, and turning to her date, she continued, "Come on, let's get out of here before I throw up." They left.

I looked at Rolf for help, but all he said was, "Janine, how could you? That was a terrible thing to do."

I was in too far to back out. "Oh, you go to hell. You can all go to hell." I stomped out. I didn't look as good as Rhonda as I went; of that I'm positive.

It couldn't ever be the same, not after a scene like that, but in a few weeks relationships were at least smoothed over, like putting wallpaper on a leaky surface the landlord won't repair, even though it's bound to come through again, sooner or later. I apologized to Rhonda, privately, when no one else could hear, and I even organized the abortion party, which was an institution back then. Everyone invited anybody they knew, especially people who didn't know Rhonda, and as the entry fee they dropped whatever they could, not less than five bucks, and frequently more, into the pot. The take brought us a long way toward paying for a safe abortion in a local hospital.

Even that couldn't heal the wounds, though. The life had gone out of the game. We weren't a group any more, just four people who knew each other and got together. Even Rolf had given up trying to give us back our magic. Then one afternoon we took the ferry at the foot of Christopher over to Hoboken. It was a favorite way we had for killing a few hours. We'd eat steamed clams at a quiet, unpretentious place, the Hoboken Clam Bar. I did, years later, go back again, but it was a mistake. It's still there, about three times larger, full of smug-faced little men in gray suits discussing business over their low cholesterol lunch plates. Not for slopping steamers through the melted butter any longer, but for people doing lunch.

Rhonda had had her abortion and should have snapped back, but damn fool that she was, she continued to moon and mope and pretend she was gazing into the middle distance. Suddenly, on the way back to town, with no warning at all, she upped and jumped over the rail, right there in the middle of the river.

Of course she could swim. And of course with a platoon of heroes

on board preparing to hurl themselves into the raging deep, nothing came of it. After my own initial shock, I was disgusted. Like everyone in that innocent era, I was steeped in psychoanalytic lore, and I knew perfectly well she didn't in the least want to be dead, but only to take over the spotlight and make everyone sorry they were so mean to her. I nearly said as much later to Rolf, but wisely I held it back. (I still had my suspicions about his part in the real life drama we were playing out.) After all, if she had honestly wanted to kill herself, she could simply have trotted a couple of blocks to the river and hopped in. Simple as that.

It really fell apart after that. Rhonda's parents came to town and took her back to Frozen Toes, North Dakota, or someplace equally attractive. She never said goodbye to me. Then Joe announced he had won a graduate fellowship in Chicago and was pulling out in a few weeks.

"Can't take New York?" I drawled. "Too much for you?"

He looked at me with an open mouth, his eyebrows raised. He shook his head. "You never stop, Janine. And since you're going to be a sculptor, why don't you try your hand at headstones? You'd be good at that." He turned to Rolf. "So long, Rolf," he said. "I'll miss you." He left without another word.

"You know," I said to Rolf, "I hate to admit it, but that headstone line wasn't bad. Either he copped it from someone else or he used up about ten years' worth of his total wit and wisdom to come up with it. And maybe mortgaged the next ten years as well."

"Oh, Janine," Rolf said. That's all. Just—"Oh, Janine."

More time passed, and we were in the war. Rolf was expecting his draft notice. We were on the roof one day, just the four of us, the gin, the grapefruit juice, Rolf, and I. "Rolf," I said, "we've always talked about getting married after we got our careers going, but this war—let's do it now."

"Oh, Janine," he said sadly. That was getting to be his favorite phrase.

We were seated on the parapet. I turned toward him. "Why the hell not? What about that half dozen kids we've said we wanted, one or more each white, black, brown, yellow, and red, you the poppa, me the momma. With this lousy war, what are we waiting for? Let's do it!"

"We can't," he said. "We—I can't." It wasn't like him to grope for words and not find them, not my poet lover.

Then I understood. "I get it. It's Rhonda, isn't it? I didn't have



to ask who would knock her up, did I, not when it was staring me in the face. And now you figure you've got to do right by our little Nell. That's it, isn't it?"

"No," he said, and he poured another enormous slug of gin into his glass. "That's not it."

"Well, then, tell me, what is it?" I waited. "Well?"

"Oh, Janine."

That was one more Oh, Janine than I could take. I stood and took a few steps away, my back to him, and said, "Yeah, I know, Saint Rolf of the perpetually bleeding heart, off to marry the poor wronged maiden. I've got to hand it to you, you sneaky son of a bitch, you've had it both ways, haven't you? There's Rhonda and there's me on the side, and now it's 'Oh, Janine, it was just one of those things and can't we be friends?,' right?"

I spun around and faced him. The gin was burning my stomach and I could taste the bile in the back of my mouth. "Well," I said, "not on your life, mister."

It's clear what happened next, but I can only remember part of it. Either I dropped my drink onto the gritty roof or else I slammed it down. I do know that I saw a liquid trickle toward a drain, and that pieces of glass were catching the late day sun. I walked toward that sweet, sad face, and when I shut my eyes now I can see it framed so dramatically by his beautiful black hair. Rolf shook his head slowly, as if I had done something wrong, and it made me furious. Not Rolf who was wrong, but bad, selfish Janine. My fists were clenched; I know that because later I could see the impression my nails had made in the palms of my hands. I must have walked toward him that way, but I honestly can't see it. Later, I told them I had fainted.

Afterwards, I joined the exodus from New York. The police had found the alcohol in Rolf, and their decision was death by misadventure. They were right: my misadventure, his death.

I never went back to Chelsea.

And now, half a century later, I was on what was to be my last trip ever to the city. I was even being honored at the meetings on my retirement after nearly fifty years in the profession, including the position of chairman for five years of one of our regional chapters. (No, I will not say chairperson; the word does not appear in any dictionary I consider respectable.) I had determined never to come back again.

It was at the cocktail reception that I saw him, a pudgy little

fellow, about sixty-five, all chins and belly, with a nametag that read Treddle. George Treddle. I had to ask. "Excuse me," I said, "but I used to know a man named Treddle, and since it's an unusual name, I wondered if perhaps—"

"Happens all the time," he laughed. "It's almost certainly a relative. My brother Ronnie used to say we were the only ones because the immigration officers couldn't pronounce the family name and settled on Treddle."

"This was a boy I knew in New York fifty years ago, Rolf Treddle." I looked at him hopefully.

His pudgy fingers wandered through a bowl of shrimp, searching out the largest one. I hate that; it's like a pig snuffling around for truffles. He was, I suppose, thinking. I gulped down the martini in my hand.

"Strange, but that doesn't ring a bell. Sorry." He smiled. "Can't help you."

"Rolf was a boy who was going to be the Great American Poet," I said, smiling back.

"So was old Ronnie, before he died. He used to say back home he'd have to change his name because Ronald Treddle sounded more like a floorwalker in a fancy department store than a poet, but the poor kid went before he could do anything about it."

A waiter passed with a tray of drinks. I stopped him. "I'll take that martini, waiter," I said. "Do you want this empty on your tray?"

"Madam, I'm sorry, but these drinks are for a group in the conference room. I'll get one for you as soon as I deliver these."

"Well, you can always get them another one instead," I said, not relinquishing my prize. When he went on, I remarked to George Treddle, "The service in New York is always so brusque. I'll be glad to get home." My hand was shaking. I knew it was Rolf, but I had to nail it down. "It must have been Rolf. We were both living in a rooming house in Chelsea, his folks were in New Alexandria, Pennsylvania, and he wrote poetry. Good poetry."

"That's Ron all right. It's got to be. About my height, jet black hair?"

I nodded. "And the greenest eyes in the world." I gripped my glass hard enough to snap the stem.

Treddle stopped chewing on the damned shrimp. "So you're someone from the old days with Ron," he said sadly. "I'm glad to meet you, Miss—" He peered at my nametag.

"Please, call me Jeanette."

"Jeanette. I wonder if you know someone else who was in that rooming house. A girl named Janine. Ron, Rolf, loved her so much. He wrote about her all the time, almost obsessively, desperately."

"She died, Janine did," I said suddenly. "Right after Rolf." It was nothing less than the truth.

"How sad. They were planning to get married, you know, and on his last trip home he told us. It was then that Dad told him about the mumps. He thought Ron should know."

"Mumps!" I felt like slapping the man. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, you see, Ron always took care of us younger kids. He was almost our daytime daddy, when Dad was off to work. That's what he was like. And when we got the mumps . . ." He shrugged. "Ron nursed us, and he got it, too. When he was eighteen. And it happened."

"What happened?" Another minute and I really would hit him.

"Don't you see? If a grown man comes down with the mumps, it can leave him sterile, unable to have kids. And that's what happened to old Ron, poor guy. He and Janine had talked about the kids they were going to have. Ron said that they were planning on one each white, black, brown, yellow, and red." Treddle's voice grew thick. "I haven't talked about this in years."

"Why didn't he tell her?" I thought of Rolf and me. And I grew cold as I thought of pregnant Rhonda. "What difference would it have made?"

"Didn't he say anything? I think he was probably planning to when—it happened. You know, it might be hard for a fellow to say even these days, and when you think of the male role fifty years ago—"

I never heard the end of that sentence because I walked away. At the bar I grabbed another martini, ripped off my nametag, and got out of the hotel and into a cab. "West 16th Street, driver, between Seventh and Eighth. I don't know the number."

When I alit from the cab I looked around. The neighborhood had changed. Flaking brownstone entry stairs had been removed, and glass doors, no-nonsense rectangles, had been installed at ground level. Curlicued wrought-iron fences protecting steps down to English basements were gone, replaced by crisp bars of steel. One brownstone that had proudly sported a portico with comic Doric columns had been stripped of its frippery. Chelsea and I had suf-

ferred the same fate: We had both been gentrified, made tidy, anonymous, barren, and dull.

I stood in front of the old rooming house. Instead of the plants that had been in our windows there were chic oil lamps wired for electricity, the stonework was pierced with air conditioning grilles, and the tiny stone lions that had flanked the stairs were gone with the stairs themselves. My eyes traveled up; the carved stone parapet had been removed—probably the old thing had crumbled—and the roofline was now straight and unadorned.

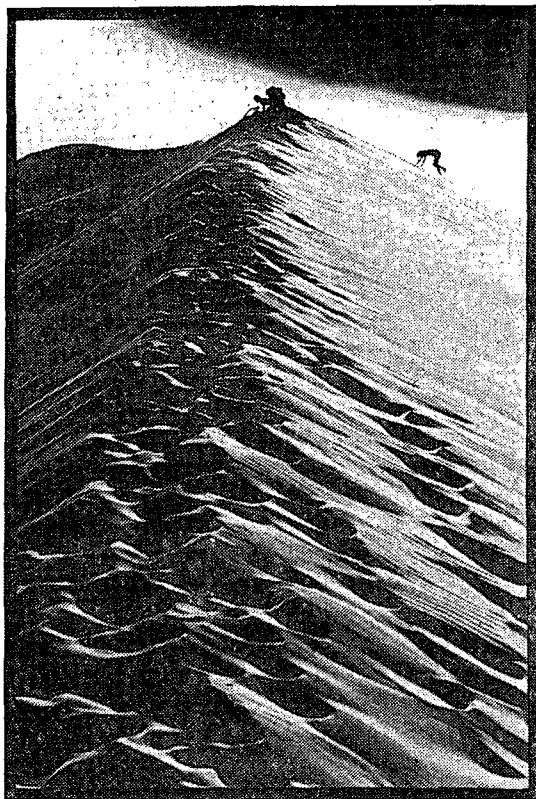
My drinks, plus standing there with my head thrown back, were making me dizzy. I swayed, steadied myself against a car, and continued to look at the roof. "Rolf," I said soundlessly, though my lips were moving, "I love you. Tell me you still love me, dear. Please tell me."

Now I'm not so stupid as to think anyone, least of all Rolf, could hear me. I wasn't doing it for that reason. I'm quite aware that there's no Rolf up there floating around in a nightgown, eager to rain forgiveness down on a miserable sinner. That sort of nonsense is for those poor bereft ninnies television reporters trap into providing entertainment for the morons at a time of personal tragedy. No, I was doing it for me, to assure myself that I was innocent, that, that, oh, well, I'll say it, ridiculous as it sounds, that my motives were pure.

I became aware of a couple of teenagers looking at me and giggling. I knew what they thought they saw; a dotty, drunken old trout babbling to herself, and I was filled with a sudden hate. What the hell did they know about life, I thought. I looked at their pimply faces, their soft bodies stuffed with junk food, the girls with their chests damn near bare, and I was revolted. Who the hell would knock you up, you little snots! I screamed inside myself.

Their grins and giggles stopped, and amazement, maybe even fear, came over their unhealthy faces. Chins dropped; eyes widened; one girl slid behind a boy. I don't know why. What gets into these kids? They're not mind readers, are they? I certainly didn't say anything out loud. That's ridiculous! I mean I couldn't have—I didn't! Did I?

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Photo by Alimontas Keyes*

An imminent "who dune it"? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



# The Symbolic Method

by Jerry F. Skarky



**T**he stainless steel vacuum canister produced a shriek out of proportion to its size. When it was finally switched off, it left a pressurized silence, as if all the sound had been sucked from the room.

"Everybody knew he drank too much," Detective Donahoe said in a hushed voice to Sergeant Allan, his senior and only fellow member of the Martin City Major Crimes Unit.

Allan roused himself from painfully adolescent memories

and rubbed his freshly-shaved face, finding a patch of stubble he had missed. He had been shaving when he received the call, and although it was his scheduled day off, he had hurried.

Even so, there was already yellow crime-scene tape up and fingerprint powder on the front door when he arrived at the offices of Red Dirt Dozers. The evidence team was hard at it, one vacuuming the carpet and the other two squirting blue



powder and staring with professional authority. The police photographer had laid aside the department's new video camera and was loading his battered old Leica.

Allan blinked as the ancient camera flashed. The photographer moved quickly to another angle while the two detectives contemplated the death scene of a legend.

Brent "Bad Bopper" Roarke, the three-time All-American and six-time All-Pro defensive tackle, still the most famous native son of Martin City, Oklahoma, even in retirement, lay faceup on a weight bench in his spacious office. He was wearing grey slacks and a yellow golf shirt, with a barbell loaded with eight fifty-pound plates across his throat.

The massive body bulged over the sides of the narrow, padded bench, the thick legs extended straight over the end, knees bent, the toes of his tasseled loafers just touching the floor. Though the weighted bar had deeply creased his flesh, it balanced with ponderous precariousness, as if a heavy step or even the breeze of movement might send it rocking.

The steel weight stanchions bracketing his shoulders reached up like beseeching arms, and under the right one lay a clear whisky bottle. Empty.

Allan cleared his throat. "The

janitor found him?" he asked Donahoe.

"Yeah, college kid," Donahoe turned back a page on his note pad. "Six thirty-five A.M. Kid usually cleans in the evening, but he had a test this morning, final exam. He found the door unlocked, but he'd already seen Roarke's blue T-bird out front. Said there was nothing missing far as he could tell. I took his statement and let him go take his test. That was okay, wasn't it, professor?"

"As long as we know where to find him," Allan said, implying by his tone that Donahoe should have held him.

One of the fingerprint men knelt by the right stanchion. With fingers covered in surgical latex, he took a black pen from his pocket and pointed it at the whisky bottle.

"Bernie," he said to the photographer.

The camera flashed in Allan's line of sight, and he looked away too late, afterimages dancing around the room, the long side of an L-shaped office suite of three rooms. This was obviously Roarke's private sanctum, a combination workout room, den, and personal museum: trophies on the mantel, Nautilus equipment and free-weight rack along the far wall.

The inner wall was filled with framed pictures of sports

figures and politicians, dozens of pictures, most featuring Roarke shaking hands. Centered above a red leather couch was a poster-sized portrait of Roarke in uniform, forearms bulging for the camera, eyes arrogant and intimidating.

Allan remembered the picture from the cover of a sports magazine. He had bought a copy after school. Football uniforms had changed more than he had realized, but, he reminded himself, it had been better than twenty years.

Allan found himself staring at the tassels on the dead man's shoes. "And the body hasn't been moved," he said, mostly to himself.

"No," Donahoe answered anyway. "I hammered the college kid pretty heavy on that. One of the officers who responded to the call was Ed Sudol, and you know, he hits the weights pretty hard himself. He saw the legs together and straight like that and called it in as a possible homicide. The first thing a man would do trying to lift that much weight is brace his legs. A woman cop now, she might not have caught that."

Allan raised his eyebrows. Donahoe shrugged.

"What about his pockets?" Allan asked.

"Looks like he already emptied them for us, or somebody

did," Donahoe said. "Keys and billfold, some loose change on the desk. A hundred and thirty-eight bucks in the billfold. I, uh, just glanced through his address book. Lots of women's names."

"Wasn't he married?"

"Oh, yeah."

"She been notified?"

"I wasn't sure how you'd want it handled."

Allan nodded. Sometimes Donahoe surprised him.

Donahoe looked at his watch. "Doc Sutton should be getting here," he said, referring to the county coroner. "I left a message with his service."

The head of the evidence team, a slender, balding man with sunburned scalp, approached them, stripping off his latex gloves. He didn't look happy.

"What's the word, Jim?" Donahoe asked him.

"*Nada*," he said wearily. "Or next to *nada*. We'll do a fiber check, but I wouldn't bet the house payment on it."

"Fingerprints?" Allan asked.

"Some beauties on the whisky bottle, but they belong to that dude," he said, indicating the body. "Unless there's somebody else running around with hands like baseball gloves. Everything else probably been wiped, not real thorough but close enough."

A large man in a business suit hurried through the door-

way, took a step toward them, and hesitated. Two patrolmen came rushing in after him, but Allan stopped them with a jerk of his head.

The man had closed his eyes. Like the dead man, his face was round and heavy-jawed, closer-shaved but still darkened by sub-surface stubble. He removed his metal-framed glasses, his lower lip trembling, and shook his head almost stubbornly.

Allan gave him a moment, then cleared his throat. "Sir, if you'll stay right there a moment . . . are you finished, Jim?"

"I have to stick around for the coroner, but yeah, just stay clear of the body. I'm gonna go outside for a smoke."

Allan nodded, not taking his eyes from the man staring at the body.

"It's all right to come in now, sir, if you would please refrain from going near the deceased. Could I have your name, sir?"

The man's weight shifted cumbrously from one foot to the other as he lumbered toward them. He pushed his glasses into place when he moved past the body, blinking at it. Then his chin jerked in delayed reaction to the question, and his glasses slipped slowly down his nose as he swallowed and stared at Allan.

"Wilson Roarke. His brother." His voice was husky but under

control. "He was drinking?"

"We don't know yet. It appears likely. I'm Sergeant Lewis Allan. This is Detective Donahoe. I'm very sorry, sir."

Wilson Roarke nodded. His chest heaved and he exhaled loudly. "May I please sit down?"

Despite the man's appearance, there was an odd prissiness in his diction, not quite a lisp.

"Certainly," Allan said.

Roarke slumped onto the sofa, his weight thudding that end of it heavily against the wall. He rubbed his face with both hands, a washing motion, his large hands and thick-haired wrists making the action almost simian. He looked at his brother again, a complexity of emotions passing through his eyes. Gradually the slackness of his face tightened and he spoke.

"No," he said. "He wouldn't even try."

"Sir?" Allan said.

Wilson Roarke looked at Allan, wheels turning behind his eyes.

"Look at him. This equipment was for his ego, not his body. You know what twenty years of football does to a man's body, lieutenant?"

"Sergeant."

"His kidneys—he urinated blood when he drank too much. He separated his right shoulder that last year, it never healed right, his wrists had been

jammed so many times—"He shook his head, pushed at his slipping glasses. "His back sounded like a string of fire-crackers when he stretched. My brother was almost a cripple, lieutenant."

Allan didn't bother to correct him again.

"What is that, four hundred pounds?" Roarke shook his head; the roll of flesh above his collar quivered and he clenched his jaw.

"Probably four fifty with the bar," Donahoe said.

"Someone dropped that weight on my brother, gentlemen. Or rolled it off the rack onto him. A strong woman could do that."

Allan sat at the other end of the couch and took out his notebook.

The notebook deflated Wilson Roarke. He settled back uneasily.

"What business are you in, sir?" Allan asked.

"I have a partnership in an accounting firm. My brother is . . . was a client. I stopped by to have a word with him . . . his taxes. Has his wife been notified?"

"That will be taken care of, sir," Allan said.

"It won't be necessary for her to—see this, will it?"

"No," Allan said. "Are there children?"

"That was—no. No children."

"You were about to say?"

"I don't know. This whole thing . . . it's still sinking in."

"Was there something about the marriage we should know?"

Roarke crossed his legs. "I do not pretend to understand their marriage, lieutenant. The important question is, are you going to investigate this as a murder or let it go as an accident?"

While he spoke there was a brief discussion in the doorway. Two ambulance attendants had wheeled in a stretcher.

"We'll take a look at the coroner's report," Allan said. "It is being investigated."

"Investigated," the younger Roarke snorted.

Allan smiled politely. "Do you have a suspect in mind, sir, perhaps someone who had threatened him?"

"I'm sure you're aware of my brother's reputation, lieutenant. He was . . . competitive. He—he *enjoyed* making enemies. He was a—I started to say he was the last of a dying breed." Roarke removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Has there been any specific recent incident?"

Staring at the floor, Roarke swallowed and shook his head.

Allan tapped his pen on the notepad. "Since you were your brother's accountant, you're probably familiar with his insurance."

Wilson Roarke looked

stricken. "Yes, well, he does have a very adequate policy."

"Who's the beneficiary?" Allan asked.

"His wife, of course."

Allan nodded appreciatively and placed a hand on the arm of the couch to push himself up. He felt the blue fingerprint powder adhere to his hand before he saw it.

"What I said about a strong woman, I didn't mean to imply—" Roarke began.

The couch had moved as Allan's legs pushed back against it; that and the powder caused his hand to slip down over the smooth leather arm. It was only natural that he wipe the powder off there under the arm of the couch. Roarke couldn't see what he was doing, but he did notice the sudden frown, then his mouth fell open in mid-sentence as Allan pushed off the couch onto his knees and twisted around to take a look under the arm.

"Lieutenant?"

"A hole in the upholstery," Allan explained.

"A bullet hole?" Roarke wasn't sure if he was joking.

Allan smiled at him as he stood. "Too big. A puncture of some kind."

Roarke stood and stiffly squatted to have a look. "Huh. I fail to see any significance . . ."

Allan pulled on the arm and

the couch rolled toward him easily on oversized casters. His eyebrows lifted meaningfully.

"It would have to be moved out of the way when the employees worked out. He did allow that," Roarke explained.

Allan pushed the couch away from the wall and looked behind it. Finding nothing, he rolled it back.

While Donahoe's voice growled in the background as he explained to the stretcher bearers why they couldn't have the body, Allan studied Roarke's face carefully.

Roarke looked totally confused. Beads of sweat stood out above his lip. He ran a finger under his tight collar.

"Lieutenant, would it be proper if I were permitted to break the news to Lacie? Brent's wife? Family and all."

"I understand, sir. I can have one of the men drive you—"

"No, that might upset her."

"I understand. I do appreciate your cooperation. You will be available if we have more questions?"

"Certainly."

They shook hands.

"Oh, by the way," Allan said as Wilson Roarke turned away. "The thing about the weights being rolled off." He shook his head. "No. Four hundred pounds falling what, three feet? It would have been . . . not pretty."

Wilson Roarke flinched and

turned blue around his mouth.

As Roarke left the room, Donahoe entered. Allan watched his approach, not quite a swagger, not quite a waddle. Donahoe tried so hard to look like a cop that he actually succeeded.

"The secretary's here. Mrs. Velma Manek."

"Send her in—no," he glanced at the body. "I'd better go out there. Oh, and Mr. Roarke Junior is going to break the news to his sister-in-law. I want somebody out there, see how she reacts, how they act together, that sort of thing. Somebody who can tell a tear from ice water."

"I can pull Rodriguez, he's on traffic."

Allan nodded approval.

Donahoe scratched his neck. "Professor, if it was murder, and if we can prove it was murder, how many suspects can there be who can hoist four hundred fifty pounds?"

Allan smiled. "I wish it was that easy."

"And why would anybody pick that way to kill somebody?" Donahoe asked.

"You have a real knack for getting to the heart of the matter," Allan said.

**V**elma Manek was a plump middle-aged woman with wide, startled eyes made even wider by her amber-tinted glasses. She sat in

the chair beside the desk in the outer room of the office suite twisting a tissue in her fingers.

She smiled at Allan, an automatic response that disintegrated.

Allan introduced himself and turned a leather chair to face her. The first question was always the hardest. Mrs. Manek glanced at him with obvious fear, twitches running from her face down her arms to her hands, where the tissue was being rapidly shredded.

"Can I get you anything, ma'am? I noticed a coffee machine out in the hall . . ."

"I never—no, thank you. That machine is full of cockroaches. I've told the man who fills it, but he never does anything. Brent, Mr. Roarke, he had me make a pot before I leave in the evening; the brewer has a timer, but he wanted it—he needed it—so strong—"

"Just take a deep breath, Mrs. Manek. That's better."

He stood and opened the door into the reception area. A coffee brewer with a pot two-thirds full of very dark coffee sat on a small table in the corner, hidden from public view by a file cabinet. Beside the brewer was a stack of Styrofoam cups. The brewer had been switched from AUTO to ON.

"You made a full pot?" he asked Mrs. Manek.

In the middle of another deep

inhalation, she nodded.

Allan smiled at her and walked past her and through the conference room. Donahoe was talking to the two young patrolmen. Allan motioned him over.

"Find out if one of our boys drank coffee from the coffee pot out there. If they didn't, look for a dirty cup and have the clean ones and the pot checked for prints."

"If they did?"

"Scream at them for a few minutes."

"What about the kid, the janitor?"

Allan tapped himself on the temple, hard. Missing breakfast had made him lightheaded. "Good, yeah. That probably explains it."

Donahoe looked confused. "You want me to ask the kid or not?"

"Sure, ask him. And have the coffee analyzed."

Donahoe nodded dubiously. "And if the janitor did drink it, should I scream at him?"

"No," Allan said. "Then you can scream at me."

"Uh-huh."

"Just find out where the coffee went," Allan said. "And don't forget the cups."

Mrs. Manek was digging in her purse for a fresh tissue when Allan returned. Color had returned to her cheeks, and she managed to return Allan's smile

without twitching.

"I really should call my husband," she said, without prompting. "But I guess there's no hurry, is there. He should be back to the house now. We had cattle out. That's why I was late."

"How long have you worked for Red Dirt Dozer, Mrs. Manek?"

"They were in their second year. He'd had some cute little bubblehead before that, her name was Marcie, and everything was such a mess."

"But the business is in good shape now?"

"Well, at least it's organized. Of course, last year we had to lay off the receptionist, but answering the phone is no hardship, though I do get tired of making excuses for Brent—" She literally bit her lip.

"I imagine that did get old," Allan said carefully.

Her nod was guilty but grateful.

"Was he seeing another woman?" Allan asked.

Her eyes evaded him. "He would just leave, and not say where he'd be, or he'd not come in at all, or he'd spend the night here and leave when I came in—"

"He would spend the night here?"

The new tissue in her hands was beginning to suffer. "Not often," she said. "But there were



times I found him sleeping on the weight bench, or, well, passed out."

"He slept on the weight bench?"

"He said the couch hurt his back." She watched Allan write in his notebook. "This was just a few times."

"What was he like to work for?"

She looked at the ceiling without moving her head and exhaled thoughtfully before she answered. "I made it very plain when I was hired that I expected to be treated as a Christian, and he respected that. He didn't blaspheme, not in front of me. And he paid me very generously."

"Did he get along with his brother?"

"Well, they had their tiffs, as brothers do. They both have that streak of orneriness, both very strong-willed."

Allan tapped his pen against his notebook, thinking. Mrs. Manek pinched the bridge of her nose and waited without meeting his eyes.

"Mrs. Manek, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but this may be important. Do you know anyone who would want your employer dead?"

Her eyes went to the tissue worried by her nervous fingers, and she swallowed. Her mouth twitched and she pressed her lips together hard as she began

to nod. When she spoke her voice was a rising sob.

"About everybody who knew him."

**R**ed Dirt Dozers was located at the east edge of town, which the small city's industry had pushed outward during the boom and receded from thereafter, leaving empty buildings and weed-grown fields to devalue survivors. One of the survivors was also the nearest place for breakfast, a twenty-four-hour truck stop where Allan since his divorce had often shared his insomnia. He had left word for Donahoe to meet him there.

Allan sat in his car for a moment before going in. He felt tired and profoundly empty. He had never met Bad Bopper Roarke, but the man's death, and perhaps even those last mortal years of booze and rumors that were spotlighted now because of his death, had taken from him something nearly as precious as friendship—something more precious and fragile as the years moved on. The mythology of memory had been violated, and in its place now and for all time would be the vision of a beer-bellied middle-aged man pinned helplessly in death like an insect in a collection.

His growling stomach didn't

help his mood. The interior of the truck stop was dimmer in daytime than at night, but the smells were the same: greasy eggs, coffee, burned bacon, all overlaid with the subtle perfume of diesel.

He didn't expect anyone he knew from the night shift to be there, but he was wrong. G.T. raised her eyebrows wearily to acknowledge him as she poured steaming coffee for two truck drivers at the counter.

He sat at a booth near a window so he could watch the traffic on the highway. The breakfast rush was over; the two truckers at the counter were the only other customers. They laughed at something Allan didn't catch, and G.T. smiled crookedly at them and said, "You wish."

She brought him coffee and ice water and with a sigh slid heavily into the opposite seat, her heels up on the seat beside him.

She reached back to tuck a frazzle of neck hair into the black braid hanging past her shoulders. A touch of grey mixed with the glossy black didn't keep her breasts from thrusting when she raised her arms, and she knew it.

"You know what love is, professor?" she asked him, smiling up at him with sardonic Indian eyes.

"Am I supposed to guess?" he asked warily.

"Love is when your heart melts and runs out your eyes," she said in her quick-fire style that was more New York Jew than Oklahoma Indian. "Of course, I cleaned that up considerably, the nighttime version is funnier, but what the heck."

Allan chuckled appreciatively. "Where did you hear this?"

"One teenage son to the other. Don't you just love it when mothers go around misquoting their children?"

"You working a double?" he asked her.

"I need the bread."

"Yeah," Allan said, feeling an illogical pang of guilt.

G.T.'s husband Boyd, a balding version of the Marlboro cowboy and an ex-cop, was currently in jail. The narcotics boys had asked him to do them a favor. The favor had involved wearing a wire to buy cocaine from a dealer to whom Boyd had sold horses. He had been entirely within his rights when he turned them down. But not surprisingly, when the object of that favor was finally arrested, he named Boyd as a co-conspirator. Perhaps the cruelest irony was that, thanks to a lawyer Boyd and G.T. couldn't afford, the dealer was now free pending appeal.

G.T. had taken a cigarette from the pack in her apron and

stared at him through the smoke curling from her nostrils.

"Somebody get killed?"

"What?"

"I saw the copmobiles and the body wagon headed east, I figure somebody must have bought it. What was it, a car wreck?"

He shook his head, hesitated only a second, and said, "Brent Roarke."

G.T.'s feet slapped the floor as she sat up.

"Somebody finally shoot the jerk?"

"He's dead, that's all I can say, G.T."

"Huh," G.T. said thoughtfully.

"He come in here quite a bit?" he asked before she could think of a question.

"Used to, then Christie—you remember Christie? Little red-head? A few years ago she broke a plate over his head and that worked pretty well, wish I'd thought of it. After that he'd stagger in once in a blue moon with some bimbo, they'd slobber over each other."

"The same bimbo?"

She started to shrug then looked at him sharply. "Should I talk to my lawyer before I answer?"

He wiggled his eyebrows. "Only if you have something to hide."

"Good. I haven't paid off that crook from last time. Let's see, the answer is no, not the same

one. The same type, cheap and dumb."

"Pros maybe?"

She considered. "Nah, didn't look smart enough to charge. Why, a woman do it?"

"I was thinking more in terms of motive. Jealous husbands, that sort of thing."

She chewed her lower lip. "I always thought being a detective in this hick town was kind of a joke."

"Yeah," he said, and cleared his throat. "Listen, his men came in here quite a bit, didn't they? What did they have to say about him?"

"What you'd expect. If he didn't pay so well, they'd quit."

"The guy have any friends?"

She thought about it. "There was a guy he used to come in with for breakfast, early, right before I got off."

"You know his name?"

She shook her head. "He was big, almost as big as Roarke, wore glasses. Suit and tie. Stuffed shirt."

"Sounds like his brother."

"I wondered."

Allan sipped his coffee and watched the traffic flow by on the highway. G.T. pulled a deep drag from her cigarette.

"Not much help, huh," she said.

"What about last night?" Allan asked.

"Last night," G.T. repeated. "Nobody came in wearing an

'I Killed Bad Bopper' T-shirt."

"Just regulars, nobody unusual?"

"Sounds like a contradiction in terms to me. Let's see, after the bar crowd . . . maybe three or four truckers . . . there was a woman in, about three or so. Middle-aged, mousy little thing, librarian type—the Bad Bopper could have stuck her in his pocket."

"She eat a meal?"

"Just coffee. Three or four cups. Looked like she could use it."

Allan drummed his fingers on the counter and watched Donahoe pull in and park his unmarked Chevy. Rodriguez was with him, in uniform.

"There's Dr. Watson," G.T. observed. She stubbed out her cigarette. "Well, Sherlock, I've got work to do."

"Bring me a special with sausage," Allan said.

"What do you think this is, a restaurant?"

Donahoe and Rodriguez slid into the seat she vacated.

"Coroner showed up," Donahoe said.

"Say anything?"

Donahoe sighed. "He did a new thing, made an incision in the body right there on the scene." He shivered and tried to hide it by stretching his arms behind his head. "Liver temperature. It's supposed to almost pinpoint the time of

death—you ever hear of it?"

"I read about it. What did he say?"

"Within fifteen minutes either way of four A.M. You were right about the weights' not falling on him, neck's not mangled enough. No visible marks at all. Jim went ahead and confirmed the prints on the bottle as Roarke's."

G.T. had returned with a tray of coffee and ice water and had overheard. She gave Allan a saccharine smile and tossed a handful of packaged creamers on the table.

"You boys want anything?"

Rodriguez shook his head. He was a few years older than Allan, still trim and muscular, sad-eyed and soft-voiced. Allan had always envied his mustache; his own seemed wispy.

"You still got those big cinnamon rolls?" Donahoe asked.

"Yep," G.T. said, taking her pen from above her ear.

"Heat one on the grill and melt some butter on it."

"Always do," G.T. said and turned away.

"What's her problem?" Donahoe asked, pouring a stream of sugar into his coffee.

"You're a cop," Allan said. "And her husband's in jail."

"So're you," Donahoe said, wounded. "So was her old man. He made his bed, let him sleep in it." He looked at Rodriguez. "Right?"

"You get as close to retirement as I am, you may not think so," Rodriguez said softly into his coffee.

"Tell me about Mrs. Roarke and little brother," Allan said to him.

"A little tense. Mr. Roarke didn't appreciate me showing up. Protective. The lady, it's hard to say, no tears or hysterics, but then she didn't seem to be the type. I had the feeling she'd maybe used up her quota already, nothing left. As far as anything hot between them, I'd say no. Just my gut reaction."

Allan's cup was empty and he held it up for G.T. to see.

"Describe her," he said.

Rodriguez blew into his mustache thoughtfully. "Definitely not what I expected. Bad Bopper Roarke, you know, you expect his wife to be an exchequerleader. Maybe she was, people change. Skinny, no makeup, hair going grey. Old maid schoolteacher type."

G.T. had been pouring Allan's coffee during the last part of Rodriguez' description, and her eyes met Allan's and abruptly dropped. She pivoted immediately on her heel.

"G.T.," Allan said.

She looked at him innocently over her shoulder. He extended his index finger and wiggled it.

"You could just whistle and bang the table like everybody else," she said.

"Was it her?"

"How the hell do I know? What am I, psychic?"

Rodriguez made circles with his fingers in front of his eyes. "Big round glasses," he said.

"What color frames?"

"Blue. Dark blue. Shade darker than her eyes."

G.T. rested the coffee pot on the table and scowled at Allan. He scooted over to make room for her.

She dropped limply, still scowling.

"I don't need this," she said. "If she did kill him she deserves a medal."

Donahoe's chest swelled and Allan pinned him silent with a stare as he pulled out his notebook.

"If she was here, it doesn't mean she killed him, G.T.," he pointed out. "It would help if we could pin down exactly when she was here."

G.T. puffed her cheeks and blew out. "She came in, let's see, about fifteen minutes before I vacuumed, and if we're not busy I vacuum at three thirty. We weren't busy. I even started a little early. Takes about twenty minutes. She was still here when I finished, but then she left when I was smoking a cigarette after. So say about three till about ten till four, give or take an hour if she needs an alibi."

Allan's fingers drummed on

the table. "Did she say anything?"

"Please and thank you. She was polite, which I admit is suspicious around here."

"Did she act nervous? Scared? . . ."

"She acted like you act when you come in here at three thirty in the morning, tired and disgusted."

"Waiting for someone?"

G.T. shrugged. "Maybe."

"Professor—" Donahoe said.

"What about the coffee?" Allan interrupted to ask him.

"The pot tested clean, inside and out. Jim used one of these little strips of paper—"

"The janitor?"

"Got the kid on the phone, he was already crashed out. He said he doesn't drink coffee, he's a Mormon. But he noticed somebody had—"

"Is he?"

Donahoe scowled, his train of thought interrupted. "Is who what?"

"Is the college kid a Mormon?"

Donahoe looked at Rodriguez, then at Allan. "Well, yeah, I guess. His driver's license was issued in Utah—I can check."

"Go on. He noticed someone had touched the coffee."

"Well, he noticed the light on the coffeemaker and the pot wasn't full. I'm just telling you what he said," he added defensively.

"Did you find the cups?"

"Yeah, we found the cups."

The kid said he never picked up the trash, didn't even take the cart out of the closet. So I looked, and that's right where I found the cups, in the bottom of the trash cart, like somebody set them there. No prints. One had cream and sugar in the bottom, the other was black. The lab boys are doing a check on them and the bottle contents." He hesitated, scowled, then plunged ahead.

"Professor, a woman couldn't have done it. I mean, it took two of us to get those weights off the body and we were straining. I don't think a woman could even lift one end."

"The woman drank her coffee with cream, no sugar," G.T. said. "Which I hope means she didn't do it. Not that anybody bothered to tell me what happened."

Allan rubbed his forehead, aware of the three pairs of eyes on him.

"One black, one with cream and sugar. You remember how Roarke took his?" he asked G.T.

"Black, I'm pretty sure."

"How sure is pretty sure?"

"You ever see me ask a customer twice? What do you think a waitress with a measurable IQ does to stay sane around here, flirt?"

Allan smiled.

"I thought you just starved



your customers. Where the hell's my special with sausage?"

**R**oarke had built his house east of town on what passed for a hill in that part of Oklahoma. The oversized white columns made it look from a distance like a small hotel. The long gravel drive crossed a cattle guard, though Allan saw no cattle.

The woman who answered the door wore bluejeans and cowboy boots and a loose white T-shirt that draped from shoulders bony as tent poles. Her bare arms were long and angular, the dry skin pale. She wore no makeup, and the lines of her face were set and sunken.

There was intelligence but no curiosity in the eyes behind the blue-framed glasses as Allan introduced himself and Donahoe and performed the ritual of condolence.

"Wilson prepared me for your visit," she said calmly.

She spoke with the oddly-clipped drawl of the mid-Atlantic seaboard. She led them through a tiled foyer with a carpeted staircase leading up under a skylight. Beside the staircase a three-tiered fountain humidified a miniature forest of tropical plants.

Allan and Donahoe followed her to the right through a wide archway into a long room with

patio doors at the far end.

"Prepared you?" Allan asked as his eyes adjusted to the interior light.

Her laugh was as dry as her skin. "He advised me, he forewarned me, then. Would you care for coffee, iced tea?"

"Coffee would be fine, if you would join us," Allan said, and Donahoe, his eyes darting surprise, nodded.

She seemed pleased. "Please have a seat," she said, indicating a pit group around a fireplace on the outside wall. She turned and disappeared through the foliage near the fountain.

Three slow-turning ceiling fans hung suspended from the vaulted ceiling. The floor was tiled in an elaborate pattern obscured by an assortment of rugs and heavy leather furniture. The outer wall was bare brick, the fireplace bracketed by picture windows looking out over the green slope of the hillside.

"Maybe we should have waited till we got the report back from the lab," Donahoe stagewhispered after they had appreciated the room and settled into cool, somewhat stiff leather chairs.

"Think she'll poison the coffee?" Allan asked in a normal voice.

Donahoe's head jerked. "She's not crazy," he whispered uneasily.

Allan smiled at him.

The sound of boots on tile turned Donahoe's head again, and he closed his mouth. Mrs. Roarke carried a bamboo tray with a coffee carafe and three clear glass mugs, which she set on a coffee table made from what looked to be an authentic wagon wheel.

"How do you take yours, Sergeant Allan?"

"Cream with just a taste of sugar."

She glanced at him curiously but didn't meet his eyes.

"Detective Donahoe?"

"Two sugars, please."

She left her own cup unpoured to bring them theirs.

"Sweet enough?" she asked politely, looking at them each in turn like a woman playing tea party with young girls.

She waited while they sipped. Allan was more intent on her coffee than his own, and gustatory savor awakened slowly. The coffee was rich and strong, the aroma powerful, the creamer was genuine cream and the amount of sugar perfect.

"This is wonderful," he said. "Colombian?"

"A blend of the good Bolivian and Jamaican," she said, gratified.

At last she poured from the carafe. Both of them watched carefully as she reached for the cream and poured. She returned the cream to the tray

beside the sugar and placed a spoon in her cup. When she picked up her cup and stirred, Donahoe's shoulders dropped.

G.T.'s imaginary voice whispered, *What did I tell you?* in Allan's ear.

"I suppose I am a snob when it comes to coffee," Mrs. Roarke was saying. "Brent always accused me of being a snob." A shadow crossed her eyes and she shivered, then she moved quickly to sit facing them.

"I could never understand how people could drink it without at least a little sugar," Allan said.

She looked at the mug cradled in her palms and smiled wearily. She must not have had much sleep, Allan thought.

"Sugar is one of the things I've learned to do without," she said. "Sugar, alcohol . . . I'm a diabetic."

Donahoe's head snapped around to Allan as if Allan had shouted at him. Allan took another sip of his coffee.

"There are some questions I have to ask," he said.

"I understand."

As if by mutual consent the three of them stared at the floor between them, Allan taking an unhurried sip of coffee, allowing himself a few thoughts on the subject of diabetes. The thoughts lingered until Mrs. Roarke raised her head expectantly.

"When did you last see your husband?" he asked from reflex.

"I last saw my husband the night before last, about seven P.M.

"He was not yet drunk, and consequently he was very irritable. The more irritable he became in the early stages, the drunker he would get. He was moderately irritable, he didn't break anything, so I expected him back late. He didn't come home at all.

"I expected him back yesterday morning. Then I expected him in the afternoon. Then after work. It's difficult not to expect, I've gotten so used to it." She sipped thoughtfully at her coffee. "Freedom, I suppose. Waiting for Godot."

Though her voice had danced along the spine of hysteria, her face had not changed expression. Watching the words come from her colorless lips, he had expected her to break; he had expected emotion to well up through the flesh and escape.

Instead she sipped again at her coffee, her little finger extended.

"Did you consider reporting him missing?" he asked her.

"No. I called Velma yesterday morning, and she—his secretary, Velma—she called in the afternoon to let me know he had called in." She swallowed and moistened her lips, staring

at him with eyes as calm as an empty field.

"I could tell by the tone of her voice. The people around an alcoholic—communicate, you see. You don't have to say things, a verbal shorthand evolves. Velma's voice told me, he was with one of his women."

Donahoe flushed and looked out the picture window.

"Can you give me the names of these women?" Allan asked.

"No. I am not the sort of wife who would want to know their names." Her eyes dropped to the floor at his feet. Unexpectedly she laughed, a stiff flexing of face and voice.

The phone rang. Mrs. Roarke turned and stared at it until it rang a second time, then she rose stiffly to answer it.

As soon as her back was turned, Donahoe's finger pointed toward his hairline and he rolled his eyes. Allan shook his head. Donahoe answered with the tiniest of shrugs.

"It's for you," she said, showing the handset to Allan.

Allan was ruminating about diabetes again when he took the phone, and again while he waited for the call to be patched through.

"Professor, it's Ed Sutton," the coroner said. "Finished with Roarke, thought you'd appreciate some of the high points."

"Go for it," Allan said.

"Okay, blood alcohol. High

enough that embalming will be redundant."

"No surprise," Allan said, his back to Mrs. Roarke.

"Time of death, four A.M., give or take fifteen minutes. Liver temperature. They say it's that accurate, haven't had much call to use it. Lividity would put it in that range, too, though, if it's important."

"Could be."

"Well," Doc Sutton said, the verbal equivalent of a shrug. "The liver test showed a few minutes after four. Want to guess the cause of death?"

"I'm here with his wife now."

"Yeah, well, you'd guess wrong anyway. The guy wasn't breathing when the weights crushed his trachea. Alcohol and a sedative, most likely a barbiturate, the lab work takes a while. Say eight or nine sleeping pills. He hadn't been dead long, the capillary—"

"How long?"

"One or two minutes."

Getting no response, Sutton said, "Professor?"

"Sorry. Anything else?"

"Oh, not much you'd be interested in. Enlarged heart, scar tissue in the kidneys, early calcification of the joints. Anything else before I turn it into paperwork?"

Allan glanced over his shoulder. Mrs. Roarke was staring serenely into her cup, turning it slowly in her hands.

"Stomach contents," he murmured softly.

"Hadn't eaten for several hours. A few grams of meat gristle, trace amount of liquor, the capsule residue."

"No coffee?"

"Coffee? No . . ." Sutton sighed into the phone. "I could use a cup myself, though."

"Good enough," Allan said in a normal voice. "I better not tie up the lady's phone. Appreciate your calling, Ed."

He thumbed the line dead on the cordless phone, then absently held it, staring at it without seeing it. After some time he looked up smiling, realized his back was turned to Mrs. Roarke and Donahoe, and turned to find them staring at him, Mrs. Roarke bland and patient, Donahoe blatantly curious.

He had already taken a few steps toward them when he realized he still held the phone in his hand. With an apologetic gesture he turned back to place it on the table.

The light was such that he could see himself reflected in Lacie Roarke's glasses as she watched him approach, her head absolutely still, the ceiling fan above her adding a strobe effect in the corner of her lens. He smiled as he ambled past her, reached for his cooling coffee, and took several small swallows before he settled into his

chair. Then he turned casually to Mrs. Roarke.

"How did your husband drink his coffee?" he asked her.

Slowly she lifted her chin and turned and stared at him.

"Black," she said. "He drank coffee primarily to atone for too much bourbon."

"Is that why you became a connoisseur?"

Her nostrils flared slightly.

They stared at each other, she with her mouth set in a parched grim line, he with a self-conscious smile.

"Did your husband take sleeping pills?"

"My husband took all kinds of pills. He lived on pills. Sleeping pills, pain pills, uppers . . . I don't know where he got them, he wouldn't go to a doctor. Sometimes when he emptied his pockets there would be a handful all mixed up with lint and everything. So if you found pills in his pockets I'm not surprised." She shuddered with disgust.

"Do you take pills, say, to help you sleep, ma'am?"

This question did seem to surprise her. "No. At one time. Not for years now."

"Mrs. Roarke, we have a witness who says you were at the truck stop on the highway last night from about three till approximately four A.M. Can you tell us why you were there?"

The set line of her mouth

curled just slightly. Donahoe unfolded his arms and sat leaning forward.

"I hoped—" she began. "I was looking for my husband."

Allan nodded. She looked away from him.

"I couldn't sleep, and I, uh, I drove around, and I found myself looking for his car. I'm embarrassed to admit it. At bars, places like that. Then they were closing, and I drove around to the all-night restaurants, and that place was the last, it was on the way home. So I stopped, and I hoped he might come in. But he didn't."

"Can you tell us where you went after you left the truck stop?"

She licked her lips and looked at him with hopeless eyes. "Home."

Allan raised his eyebrows at her. Her expression didn't change.

"All right," he said gently.

Donahoe drank the last of his coffee and set his cup down with a clink on the glass of the table. He folded his hands across his stomach and looked uneasily at his thumbs.

Allan tapped his fingers rhythmically on the arm of his chair. "I'm sorry," he said. "But the question I really want to ask you is why you married Brent Roarke."

Mrs. Roarke laughed, rasping, rocking forward, glancing

as she laughed at their sober faces. "Why I married my husband." The mirth slowly drained from her eyes.

Donahoe's chair groaned as he pushed out of it.

"Excuse me," he said to Allan with strained dignity. "Ma'am, can you tell me where the, uh, bathroom is?"

Mrs. Roarke pulled herself into the present and gave him directions.

The sound of his footsteps diminished, though the silence that remained was far from empty. Allan with his question had conjured the past.

"A woman's best hope was to marry out of it," she said.

Allan waited.

"Back home," she said. "When I was growing up. You don't have sharecroppers, poor people, generations of poverty, not like we had there.

"I wasn't pretty enough, but I was intelligent, more intelligent than my brothers and sisters. Or my mother and father, for that matter."

Her voice had softened into a wistful drawl. She cleared her throat and resumed more briskly. "Anyway, school was easy for me, and I earned a scholarship to college.

"Brent—" she hesitated, blinking, and swallowed. "I was working on my doctorate by then. He was a professional athlete who had been injured.

I wanted him for my research. He spoke at an awards banquet and I went up to him after the banquet and introduced myself, and while I was explaining to him about my paper he took off my glasses and he just kissed me. Like he owned me. Like he owned the world. Just kissed me. I was twenty-six years old, I had both eyes open, and I walked right in."

Her right hand had curled into a fist. She raised it and looked at it, flexed the fingers open and let it drop.

"I was so intense then," she said softly. "So much in a hurry. So driven. That must have been what he saw in me. What attracted him. Don't you think?"

Allan didn't say anything, though she looked at him and waited. Then the focus of her eyes drifted inward.

Allan's cup was empty. He stood and carried it to her chair and reached down beside her for her mug. At that moment he was not at all happy with his job, and he avoided her eyes while he poured coffee from the clear carafe. He added cream and a taste of sugar to his, cream to hers. When she reached for her mug, their fingers touched. She thanked him and he nodded, slipping his empty hand into his pants pocket, in no hurry to sit down.

She sipped at her coffee, watching him over her cup. He



did the same, letting himself slouch a little, aware that Donahoe's departure had subtly relaxed the official status of the interrogation.

"Was he violent?" he asked, his tone respectful but personal.

She smiled. "No. His cruelty wasn't physical. My youngest brother has Down's syndrome, and Brent paid his way through a special school. But he also had a vasectomy because he didn't want to father retards, as he put it."

"Talking to you, I wouldn't think he had anything to worry about. You finish your paper?"

Her brow wrinkled and almost instantly released, leaving pallid stripes between the lines. "My thesis? I never submitted it. Brent wouldn't hear of my working."

"I never finished mine," Allan said, confiding. "Let's see. *A Correlation Between Measured Intelligence Quotients and Modus Operandi of Inmates Convicted of Homicide in Illinois State Penitentiaries*. The title was nearly as long as the paper."

He set his coffee on the table beside his chair before he folded himself into it. Her head tilted as she reappraised him.

"Couldn't you prove the correlation?"

He crossed his legs and reached for the coffee. "Oh, I

could. There is one. The more intelligent the murderer, the more symbolic the method of death."

Mrs. Roarke again licked her lips. "That's very interesting," she said.

"What was the title of your thesis?"

"What? Oh. I don't remember the exact... *A Holistic Approach to Stress Management in Injury Rehabilitation*, something like that."

"You were in the health field?"

"No—well, yes, clinical psychology." She chewed her lower lip as she hesitated. "What exactly is a symbolic method of murder?"

Allan smiled dolefully. "What got me thinking was a case in Minnesota. A man chopped up his wife and wrapped the pieces in butcher paper and hid them in his freezer. When they caught him, he explained that his wife was frigid."

She made a sound, a gasping hiccup that brought her fingers to her lips.

"Ted Bundy is a more sophisticated example," he continued. "Since he was illegitimate, his mother refused to acknowledge him as her son, claimed he was her little brother. Not something a little boy wants to hear. He grew up to be a strangler of women."

"Rather simplistic," she said hoarsely and cleared her throat.

"An eye for an eye," Allan said. "We seek revenge not just on the person, but on that part of the person we cannot love."

"Perhaps you should have entered my field, sergeant."

"Sometimes the two fields overlap. Except one pays better."

Mrs. Roarke didn't smile. "You think I hated him because he drank, and as revenge for his drinking, symbolically, I crushed his throat with all that weight."

The question was asked almost casually, an interesting theory to consider.

"It would fit," Allan admitted.

"If I could lift the weight."

"You could lift eight fifty-pound weights one at a time, Mrs. Roarke," he said, a statement of fact.

It took several seconds for her to lift her chin and swallow, and during those seconds her eyes betrayed the flurry of thought behind them.

"Wilson told me—I understood that the weights had fallen . . ."

Allan smiled at her. "That's where intelligence comes in, Mrs. Roarke. Consider a bar, balanced on a fulcrum. If a weight is placed on one end, the other end rises. Unless." He paused to see her reaction to the image so far. An expression of polite curiosity labored to

emerge from her preoccupied stare.

"Unless something heavy prevents it from rising. Like a couch. It doesn't take much strength to balance the bar while another weight is being added, Mrs. Roarke."

She showed absolutely no interest whatsoever.

"There's a hole under the arm of the couch in your husband's office. My theory is that the hole was made when too much weight was stacked on the other end. It would have to be a one-side-and-then-the-other process, but under the circumstances, it would be natural to hurry. For someone not very familiar with weights, it would be trial and error, hoping he wouldn't come to, hurrying desperately. And then the couch tears—probably lifts off the floor—and the weights start to slide off. You'd have to start all over, not sure it would look like an accident—not sure it was going to work at all . . ."

Mrs. Roarke's eyes had closed. Now she opened them. She scratched at the dry skin on the back of her hand, her brow knotted.

Her head dropped and she slowly thumbed the red marks she had dug in her skin. "My husband hated himself. He was beginning to grow old. The glory was behind him, and he was bitter. He was pathetic."

It sounded like a memorized piece, a speech recited so often it could be repeated without conscious thought. But never aloud, until now.

"It wasn't something you planned, was it?" Allan asked.

She sniffed.

"What time did you leave the truck stop?"

She answered with a sigh, as if the whole thing bored her: "A few minutes before four. I had planned to wait until four, but I couldn't sit there any more."

"You left the truck stop, and it occurred to you that he might be at his office. You drove by and saw his car. You probably had to work up your courage before you went in."

"No," she said thoughtfully, mildly surprised. "I felt numb, but I was really thinking quite clearly. Dread, perhaps, but not fear."

"The door was unlocked?"

She nodded. "I knew he was drunk or he would have locked the door behind him. If the door had been locked . . ."

"You would have gone home."

She bit her lip and nodded.

"But you went in."

She swallowed and nodded. "I went in. He was out cold. I tried to wake him, I—I shook him . . . There was an empty whisky bottle . . ."

"You couldn't wake him up."

She glanced at him, then away, then back again. "I kept thinking about my father. So frustrating. My mother spent her life making it possible for my father to drink himself to death. And I marry a man like . . . and I have this house—I don't think my mother ever lived in a house with paint on it—" Her voice trembled and she bit her lip.

If the dam ever breaks, Allan thought. He waited while she composed herself, and past her through the archway he saw Donahoe's round pink face watching through a fringe of fern. He moved his head slowly from side to side, and Donahoe nodded.

Lacie Roarke sniffed and raised her head.

"I couldn't do anything for him. There was nothing I could do to help him. I threatened to leave him, he cried, he begged, I tried to talk him into counseling—I really—I really tried." She looked at Allan as if to see whether he believed her, and he nodded.

Her eyes widened in realization. "I'm confessing," she said.

For a moment they stared at each other. Then her head turned and fell back heavily against the chair. Her eyes closed.

"You know anyway," she said wearily. "Why haven't you read me my rights?"

"I can do that," Allan said, reaching for the laminated card he carried in his jacket. He gave the card the perfunctory reading he felt it deserved and returned it to his jacket.

"We can go down to the station and you can make a formal statement if you like. If a confession is made voluntarily and we have a *corpus delicti*, or body of evidence, to support that confession, then an arrest may be made. At this point I just want to know what happened."

"You sound like a college professor sometimes," she said, her attempt at teasing garish with suppressed tension.

Allan smiled sympathetically, but he couldn't let her back away too far. "So. Tell me what happened."

Her head lifted high on her thin neck. "So. I killed my husband. He was driving me crazy, and I killed him."

"How," Allan said. He was pushing her now, his question riding the heel of her answer.

"I would threaten him with divorce and he would beg me. Beg me. He was such a pathetic man."

"How did you kill him?" Allan repeated.

Her eyes were wide behind the glasses, and empty. "You said. The weights, the couch..."

"Let's go back to when you

couldn't wake him. Was he snoring?"

Her staring eyes flickered inward, then returned to emptiness. "I don't remember."

"His mouth was open, air was coming out?"

Resentment hardened her stare. Her head dropped back against the chair and her eyes closed. He could see repulsion crawl across her face as she remembered.

"His mouth was open. He snorted when I shook him, but he didn't wake up."

"What did you do then?"

"I went to make coffee." Her eyes sprang open. "I wanted to talk to him. I was going to pour coffee down him till he choked."

"You were angry?"

Her eyes dropped closed, and she took a deep, tired breath. "I wanted to talk to him. I didn't know really what I wanted to say."

Her head rolled and she lifted it and looked at Allan. "I remember. The coffee was ready to be turned on, and after I turned it on, I went back in and sat on the couch and watched him, and I don't remember thinking about anything, I just watched his mouth open and close and listened to the coffee brewing. I don't remember thinking."

Her look turned uncertain, and Allan nodded.

"I poured the coffee into those

foam cups, and I remember—" her eye winced closed "—I felt strange, I—as if I were outside my body watching myself pour the coffee, and the coffee was hot, and I couldn't think, I was holding a cup in each hand thinking these strange things. I mean, I didn't want to burn him with the coffee, and I'm just holding it, a cup in each hand—" Her hands reached out and she looked at them and then dropped them in her lap.

"I was sitting there on the couch holding the coffee, waiting for it to cool, not wanting to spill it, and I began to think about the balance of things, about my life and my mother and her life . . . and I was balancing these cups, and staring at him on the bench, and there was this empty bar, this steel bar above him, you know, on the supports, and I thought how good a lever it would be, to move things, to put things back into balance . . . and the couch had moved, had rolled when I sat down—it wasn't a matter of killing Brent, it was correcting this imbalance . . ."

She turned to Allan, the bloodshot eyes rolling desperately to focus on him. "That's insane, isn't it? I wasn't even thinking about killing him."

"So you set the coffee down?"

"I carried it back to the outer office. I knew by then what I was going to do, and I did it like

you said. I wedged the couch caster with the whisky bottle so it wouldn't move after it fell the first time—I wedged it with my foot. But I wasn't panicking, I wasn't even hurrying. It was as if Brent wasn't even there. I don't think I even looked at him. Until I was finished and I looked at him and realized he was dead. Then I started to shake so hard I had to sit down."

Her shoulders drew up and she hugged herself.

"But still you didn't panic," Allan said.

"No." Something like pride glittered deep in her eyes. "It seemed like what I'd done was necessary. It seemed right. That was the first thing that hit me. The second thing was, I didn't want to get caught." She smiled, abashed, and appeared grateful for Allan's wry smile.

"I wiped everything I thought I'd touched with a paper towel. And I smoothed the nap of the rug so you couldn't see that the couch had been rolled out. I rolled the bottle back with my foot. Did I—did I miss something?"

"What?"

"Did I miss a fingerprint or something?"

"No," Allan said. He raised three fingers. "Motive. Opportunity. Method."

She nodded. "I thought I was being so careful, and it just didn't matter, did it."

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Allan asked.

She considered for a moment. "The coffee."

Allan nodded.

She raised her hands to her head and pressed against her temples. "The cups were on the front desk. I couldn't just leave them there. There was no place to pour them, so I drank them both. It was terrible coffee. I was going to take the cups with me, then I thought, no, make it look like someone else was there, make it look like it couldn't have been me, so I poured sugar in my cup and dropped them both in the cart in the janitor's closet. It wasn't very smart, I suppose."

"It was very smart," Allan said.

Neither of them spoke for the better part of a minute. Allan had heard what he needed to hear, but he went over it all again point by point in his mind to make sure. When he was satisfied and looked again at Mrs. Roarke, he realized she must have been thinking, too.

"He had emptied his pockets on the desk," she said, her nostrils flaring with the effort of control.

Allan slowly nodded, seeing the direction that recollection had led her.

"Did he ever threaten to kill himself?"

Her head jerked up. She

swallowed, and a wild light began to glow in her eyes. "He didn't have the guts. He was a pitiful, drunken—I told him he couldn't do it, not to threaten me with that—"

"When was this?"

The wild eyes slowly settled into focus. "Over and over and over . . ." she said so hoarsely he could barely hear.

Allan watched her run a hand through her limp hair.

Her head fell back against the chair. She turned slowly toward Allan, forcing the muscles of her rigid neck in minute, precise jerks; her eyes stunned with realization.

"That's why you asked about the pills. There weren't any pills in his pockets. He was already dying, wasn't he?"

Allan hesitated.

"Oh, my God," she said. "He was . . ."

Allan nodded.

She began to shake her head back and forth, barely perceptible at first. Her narrow chest jerked and she sobbed, but no tears came from her eyes. Her hands drew into fists. With no further warning she threw her head back and screamed.

G.T. was sawing at a chicken-fried steak in the rear booth when Allan and Donahoe walked in. She looked up with dark-circled eyes and motioned



with her knife for them to sit.

"Thought you didn't eat here," Allan said to her.

"Cooked it myself," she said between chews. "I'm so damn tired I can't taste it anyway."

She took a sip of ice water. "Well? You bust her?"

Donahoe and Allan looked at each other. Allan stared until Donahoe realized he wanted him to answer.

"Naw," he said. "The professor says she didn't kill him."

She paused with a french fry on her fork like a speared fish. She set the fork on her plate and listened while Allan summarized his conversation with Mrs. Roarke.

"I drove her to the emergency room, and they admitted her to the psychiatric wing," he concluded. "It may take a while, but I think she'll be all right."

G.T. frowned at him. She picked up her fork and set it back down.

"How can you be sure she didn't slip him the mickey?" she asked, one eye squinted shut.

Allan pointed a finger at her. "You gave her an alibi; first of all. The time frame didn't fit. It takes time for a sedative to dissolve and enter the bloodstream—plus time for a strong

man to succumb to a coma before he dies. You'd be the star witness for the defense. Then there's the small matter of her confession. First time I've ever had a confession help prove someone innocent."

"And her prints weren't on the whisky bottle, his were," Donahoe pointed out.

"That's another thing. Where was the loyal Watson?" G.T. asked, picking up her fork.

"I'm smart enough to know when I'm in the way," Donahoe grumbled at the window.

G.T. rolled her eyes at Allan. They fell back into thoughtful silence. G.T. sawed at her steak.

"She gonna be charged with anything?" she asked.

"That's up to the D. A.," Allan said.

G.T. snorted. "He may go after murder anyway."

"No, he won't. No jury in the world would convict her."

"That reminds me, professor," Donahoe said. "I been thinking. What do you think our chances would be if we got some of the boys together and all of us went to the D. A.? You know, about getting Boyd out?"

G.T.'s fork did a flip and clattered on the floor.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Ken Weber

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?  
The answer will appear in the May issue.*

Both signs on the large double doors were in elaborate Gothic script. One had been painted a long time ago with painstaking care. It said:

The Crusades Room  
Please Enter

Most of the gold flourishes and ligatures had flaked off, and what the original calligrapher would have called majuscules—capital letters, the summit of his craft—had taken on the shabbiness of neglected old age.

The other sign simply hung on the door. It had been born in the crisp whirr of a laser printer, its perfectly shaped and precisely etched letters the product of technology and someone's whimsical choice of typeface for a sign that was only temporary. It said:

Closed To The Public

The ironic contrast was not lost to Glen Crockford as he pulled one of the big doors open, but he said nothing to the young assistant curator who followed him in. Her job, after all, was "artifact systems management and display control." She had an undergraduate degree in archaeology but the museum board had chosen her for her master's in business administration.

When the door closed behind them and their eyes had adjusted to the dimness, her first comment, right on cue, was, "When we reopen next month, the inventory in here will have a 30 percent greater viewer access than before."

Glen suppressed a groan but he couldn't check himself completely; the Crusades Room had always been the board's greatest pride.

"Ms. Sparks. Not *inventory*. Please. These pieces . . ."

She didn't hear him, or else she was not paying attention.

"That's a pretty effective return. As you know, we spent almost

seven million of the Lansdorff endowment in here, over half of it on new acquisitions for this beauty!"

She reached under a console, flipped a few switches and one end of the room literally came to life with sounds, backscreen projections, and lighting changes. It was the museum board's new pride and joy: a diorama of the siege of Jerusalem in 1099 A.D.

They both took a few steps toward the end of the room and then paused together to absorb the overpowering visual effect of great, thick walls, siege towers, and battlements that reached right up to the high, vaulted ceiling. The audio was overpowering too, for as the recording tape turned, sounds of battle grew louder and more intense.

To the right and left sides were lowered drawbridges, each complete with half-raised portcullis that allowed viewers a stooped entry into the castle itself.

"We're building for predominant traffic flow through the right here." Ms. Sparks was walking toward the drawbridge on the right. "That's why this entrance is closer."

Glen Crockford followed her obediently. He couldn't help but admire what they'd done. Such a difference from the museums we once knew, he thought to himself, although he couldn't help noting the electronic glow in the archway that warned in red: YOUNG CHILDREN MAY BE FRIGHTENED.

His cynicism almost disappeared once he went inside, for here the battle raged even more loudly and more realistically. Heating elements in the floor and ceiling meant one could not just see and hear the fire, but actually feel it. There was even smoke—artificial smoke. The fire department and the department of public health had thrown a combined fit when the real stuff had been proposed in the original plans. But the sanitized alternative belched out its approved parts-per-million of hydrocarbon at sixteen-second intervals, and it occurred to Glen that even if it was no more real than the fire, it sure was different from a guided tour.

Except for the walkway, the floors where they now stood were covered in rushes. They were in living quarters, and a scatter of robes, overturned jars, and broken furniture suggested that this part of the castle had already been overrun by the invaders. Almost out of the light, a decapitated body lay in the grotesque twist of violent death. Glen tried to make it out through the smoke and gloom. It could have been a woman's body.

"You're obviously not hiding any of the Crusaders' behavior are you?" he said to Ms. Sparks.

"Try this one!" she responded as she led him round a turn where

a heavily armored knight held his two-handed sword over a clutch of frightened children. "They were a bloodthirsty bunch, the Crusaders. No point in hiding that fact. Everywhere they went was a slaughterhouse."

Glen was about to ask whether all the bloodthirsty realism was really a museum's proper task when Ms. Sparks took his hand and led him through a low archway.

"It's not all action and gore. This is quieter. See, we have to build in relief every so often. This is the Saladin room. We spent a potful in here. And in the next one too. That's the Richard the Lion-Hearted room. A bit kitschy, I guess, but those are two names people know."

It was indeed quieter and Glen felt more at ease. The light was brighter too; in fact, the two rooms—adjacent alcoves, really—were almost traditionally museum-like.

He walked slowly, deliberately relaxing the pace. But Ms. Sparks was not in a hurry. Apparently she wanted to spend time here.

"Most of this inventory is from collectors," she said. "We had to pay. In some cases *really* pay! That jewelry was really expensive. Eleventh century. Made in Acre. So was the hookah pipe. The crossbows and scimitars are pretty standard stuff. They're all real but only one of the crossbows is period-authentic. And check this! Here! The Turkish chess set!"

Glen was still staring at the crossbows, trying to guess which one was "period-authentic." "We bought this chess set in Venice. It was part of the loot taken from the Turks in the Fourth Crusade by the old Doge. Gorgeous, isn't it? Worth the fortune we paid."

It was strikingly beautiful, Glen agreed. And huge. The figures were ivory and black jade. On both sides the king and queen towered over the other figures. The bishops were perfectly matched but had contrasting expressions on their faces. Each pawn was a different tradesman.

Glen was about to pick up a rook to test its heft when Ms. Sparks called out.

"Over here is our problem piece."

Glen looked around. He'd lost her.

"No here. Over here! I'm in the Richard room!"

Reluctantly, Glen left the chess set to join her.

"Watch out for those javelins, Mr. Crockford!"

Glen was tall and the Richard and Saladin rooms were set off from each other by an arch made of two long, pointed spears. He had to duck to get from one alcove to the other.

"You can see," Ms. Sparks was explaining before he got there,

"we have a lot more Richard stuff than Saladin."

Glen winced at "stuff" but he could see what she meant.

"It's a lot easier to get, isn't it?" he offered.

"Well, nothing's easy in the museum business, but yes, it is. Those bills, for example." She pointed to a stack of longhandled spears with hooked blades. "Not all authentic, but that's okay. And spurs, crossbows, swords—that kind of stuff."

Glen wondered if any of it was period-authentic but he didn't ask.

"We have to make scaled-down replicas of some of it, like this mangonel here." She patted a working model of a catapult. "Sometimes authentic doesn't matter all that much if you can show how the technology worked. It's the process then that's authentic. Besides, we have *some* real stuff. See the dice? We have twelve pairs that range from mid-eleventh to early fourteenth century. And those candlesticks? They have Sir Hugh Fitzroy's seal!"

She paused for a moment, reflectively. "What we need is a grabber for this room—like the chess set in there." She paused again. "And we have it, but we can't prove it. That's what I mean by our 'problem piece.' There. The bathtub. It's here on spec till next week."

Ms. Sparks led Glen over to a metal tub just large enough to hold a single adult uncomfortably.

"Richard the Lion-Hearted's bathtub! Maybe. It comes from Tri-fels castle in Austria, where Richard was held for ransom," she said. "And we know it's old enough. It's entirely possible Richard used it. But calling it Richard's bathtub—I don't know. It would sure add zip, but I'm really not sure we should pay for something we can't be certain of. You see, bathing is hardly a technology. And really, it's just a tub. Nothing spectacular. But if it were *Richard's* bathtub. . ."

Glen took a deep breath, held it, then exhaled heavily. He wasn't quite sure Ms. Sparks had stopped.

"Why does this bother you," he asked, "when you already have paid for something whose ancestry is not what you think?"

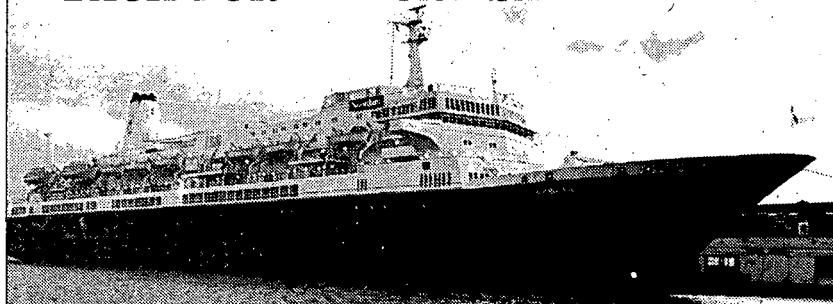
*What is Glen Crockford referring to?*

---

See page 148 for the solution to the March puzzle.

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FICTION

# —Here's— Looking at You

by Beth R. Kiteley

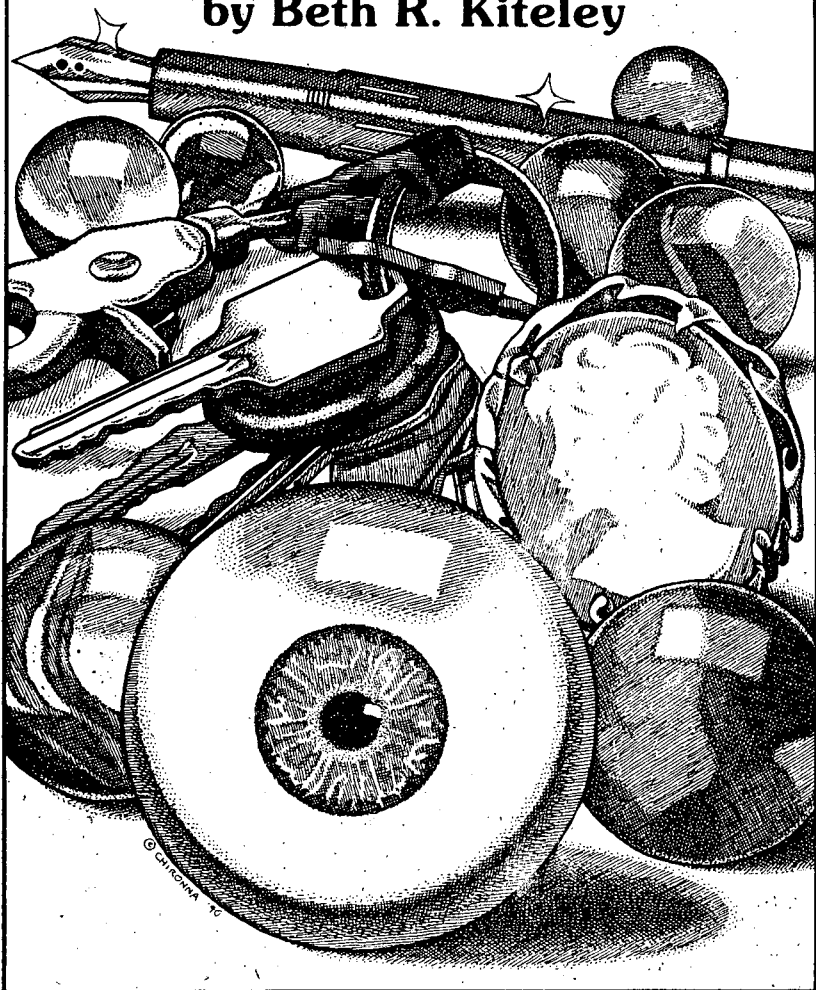


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Charlie looked at the eye, and the eye looked back at him. It was just lying there on a tray, a blue-gray eye, with little specks of darker color in the iris. The white was clear; no veins showed. It was nice, he thought, if you like eyes just lying around. He reached out and picked it up.

It was smooth and hard—a really fine glass eye. It looked very real. He turned to the back of the shop.

“Hey, Joe!” he called. “Where’d you get the eye?”

Joe, the proprietor of the small pawnshop, came hobbling up the aisle toward the young policeman. “Oh, yeah,” he grunted around his cigar. “Ain’t it a beaut? Guy brought it in a few days ago. Said it belonged to his dad, but his dad died.”

“A funny thing to pawn,” commented Charlie Tomas. “What’d you give him for it?”

“Nothin’, not for it.” Joe shifted his cigar to the other corner of his mouth. “But he brought in a bunch of stuff, and I just lumped it all together.”

“Yeah? What kind of stuff, Joe?” asked Charlie Tomas.

“Ah, come on, Charlie. Not stolen stuff. Stuff from his dad. I told you his dad died.”

“Yeah, I know you told me. But what kind of stuff did his dad have?” Officer Tomas hadn’t been on the force very long, but

he had grown up in this kind of neighborhood. He felt at home here, and he understood the atmosphere. And the eye was just offbeat enough to pique his curiosity.

“Oh, a radio, an old one, and an old camera. Just junk, Charlie. Nothin’ suspicious. Some old pipes—well, some of them were pretty fancy, but god, they’re old. They been smoked a long time. And a picture or two—no worth to ’em, but the frames might sell sometime, if he don’t redeem ’em.” Joe waved his hand vaguely around the shop.

“Yeah, well, sounds okay, I guess. But the eye—” Charlie Tomas shook his head again. “That’s funny, y’know?” He put it back on the tray.

“How you like my *display*?” asked Joe proudly. “Looks good, huh?” He indicated the tray, a plain black enameled one. He had placed a variety of things on it—a cameo, some marbles, a gold-decorated pen, a ring of keys, the eye—ten or twelve items.

“Not bad,” said the policeman. “Well, gotta go, Joe. Check with you later.” He let himself out the door with its warning bell, and resumed his stroll up the avenue.

This was a neighborhood that had once been a lively shopping area for nearby homes. Many

of the shops were now closed or taken over by evangelists. A fortune teller had set up shop on the corner across from Joe's Pawnshop. People still lived nearby, and a few in the upper floors of the old buildings. But by and large, the neighborhood was pretty quiet and, most of the time, only lightly populated.

Charlie Tomas' beat covered this area, five square blocks, and extended over onto Second where there were still a number of apartment houses, some built to be that, some made from big old residences built fifty or more years before.

There were a lot more people on Second Avenue. They hung out the windows to screech at one another. They sat out on the stoops, or on the sidewalks sometimes, in chairs they dragged out every day and dragged back in at night. Children shrieked and played in the street, dodging the traffic expertly. Mothers yelled and swore at their offspring, and the children for the most part blithely ignored them. Old people hobbled back and forth, stopping to visit one another, to shake their heads in mingled pride and dismay over the youngsters.

Most men on this street worked, at least when they could find work. Not many had a regular, fulltime job. Many of the

women worked too, in finer homes as maids or cooks, or waitresses in uptown cafes and diners. But still there were always many people around.

Charlie tended to hurry through the dilapidated business section where the pawnshop was, to dawdle through the dilapidated section thronging with people. Maybe that was backwards; maybe the crime he was there to prevent, or to solve after it was committed, was in the derelict shops. But he was drawn to the people, the noise and smells and sights of humanity at home.

Today, when Charlie turned onto Second Avenue, he immediately found some work ready for him. A group of older people had surrounded a rabbitty young man and were verbally berating him, and in some cases threatening him with canes or wrinkled fists.

"Here, here." Charlie Tomas waded into the crowd, gently thrusting bent bodies and straggly-locked heads aside. "What's the trouble; what's going on?"

"Officer," screeched an old woman, "arrest this scum. He's a thief."

The young man grinned, showing stained and broken front teeth. "Can it, granny," he sneered. "You're old and crazy."

Charlie Tomas gripped the

man's shoulder. "That's enough," he said sternly. "You'll be there sometime, bud." He turned to the crowd. "What makes you think he's a thief?"

A babble of voices broke out, and it took a few minutes for Charlie to calm them enough that he could pick out someone to talk. He spied two old men standing together. One leaned heavily on a gnarled stick; the other had an eyepatch. Blind leading the lame, thought Charlie, or was it the other way around?

"You," he said, pointing to the two. "What makes you think he's a thief? And the rest of you shut up!" he yelled as a babble broke out again.

The man leaning on the cane shook his head. "I'm just going by what the rest say," he protested. "We're new to this neighborhood."

"But we already been robbed," added the other man, his one eye glaring.

"Didn't you lock your place up?" asked the policeman.

"Sure did." Both men nodded their heads. "But someone picked the locks."

"Why don't you search this guy?" cried a whitehaired woman. "He's probably got the picks on him."

Patiently, Charlie asked again, "But why do you suspect him?"

"He don't live here," screamed another old woman, pushing forward. "But we always see him in our buildings."

"How about it?" Charlie asked the young man. "Where do you live, and you got any identification?"

"Sure! Leggo me and I'll get it." The man shrugged his coat back into place and dug into his pocket. "Here's my driver's license, see—it's got my address and all. I ain't got nothin' like they're saying. See?" And he turned his pockets out for Charlie, displaying only a car key and door key on a ring, a worn and slim wallet, and a filthy rag of handkerchief.

"Then what are you doing in this neighborhood so much?" asked the policeman.

"Well, it's my dad," the man whined. "He's got to move, and I been looking for a room for him. Thought where all these other old people are he might like it." The man replaced his belongings in his pockets. "That's all." He spread his hands. "Honest!"

Too many honests, thought Charlie. But no evidence. "Well, I suggest you find a place somewhere else," he said. "Don't be hangin' around if you don't live here. Let him through here; let him through." He gently cleared a path for the man and sent him on his way.

The elders watched him go and started to disperse, many muttering about "police not doing you any good" and "young punks."

The two old men also turned away, but Charlie called them back. "Tell me about your robbery," he urged. "What was taken?"

"My glass eye, for one," the man with the patch exclaimed. "I hadn't put it in—so much dust when you're moving. And when I went to get it, it was gone."

"And my best cane," added his companion. "And our pipes—"

"And the pictures of my folks," nodded the one-eyed man.

Charlie Tomas smiled. "You wait right here," he said. "We're going to get your stuff back." He used the phone on the corner—miraculously in working order—to call for a patrol car "with a big trunk," he specified to the mystified sergeant at the precinct office.

Joe wasn't happy to see so much merchandise being claimed by the two old men, but he couldn't protest about the eye. The old man whipped off his patch and inserted the glass orb expertly, turning to smile at Charlie and glare at Joe.

"There!" he said. "Ain't that pretty?"

Charlie Tomas smiled, too.

"A perfect match."

He and the driver of the patrol car helped the old men load their belongings, and Charlie waved them off.

"Whatcha doing?" asked Joe grumpily as the officer re-entered his shop. "Charlie, I didn't know that stuff was stolen."

"Sure, sure," answered the young cop. "Just sit down and shut up, Joe."

The man obeyed, grumbling. Charlie sat, too, in the shadowed corner of the shop, but with a clear view of the display area. The two sat for ten minutes, neither speaking, till suddenly the warning bell on the door clanged.

A rabbitty figure darted in, snatched at something on the tray, and called out; "Thanks, Joe!"

"Stop right there," called Charlie Tomas, rising to his feet.

The newcomer's hand convulsed nervously, dropping what he had snatched, and Charlie bent to pick up a set of picklocks, strung neatly on a key ring, with several keys as camouflage.

"What do you know?" he smiled. "Them crazy old granies was right."

"It was the tray," explained Charlie Tomas to his chief, and

later that night to Mrs. Tomas. "You remember that party game we used to play, where they showed you a bunch of things on a tray, then covered them up and you had to name them all?"

Charlie's wife nodded and laughed. "Yes, I remember. You always won; you could always remember them all."

"It was just like that," said the policeman. "Joe had put out this tray, see, and every time some little gadget came in, he'd rearrange the display. But the picklocks just stayed there, and all the rest of the stuff sort of

hid them. The punk would dodge in and grab them, run out and do a job, then put them back when he brought the junk in for Joe to fence. That way the picklocks weren't on him most of the time, and in case he got stopped, he'd be clean. Just like when I talked to him.

"It was the glass eye that did them in," he added. "I might never have even looked at that tray, but once I looked, I knew what was there. And I looked because that thing just lay there looking at me, and I had to look back!"

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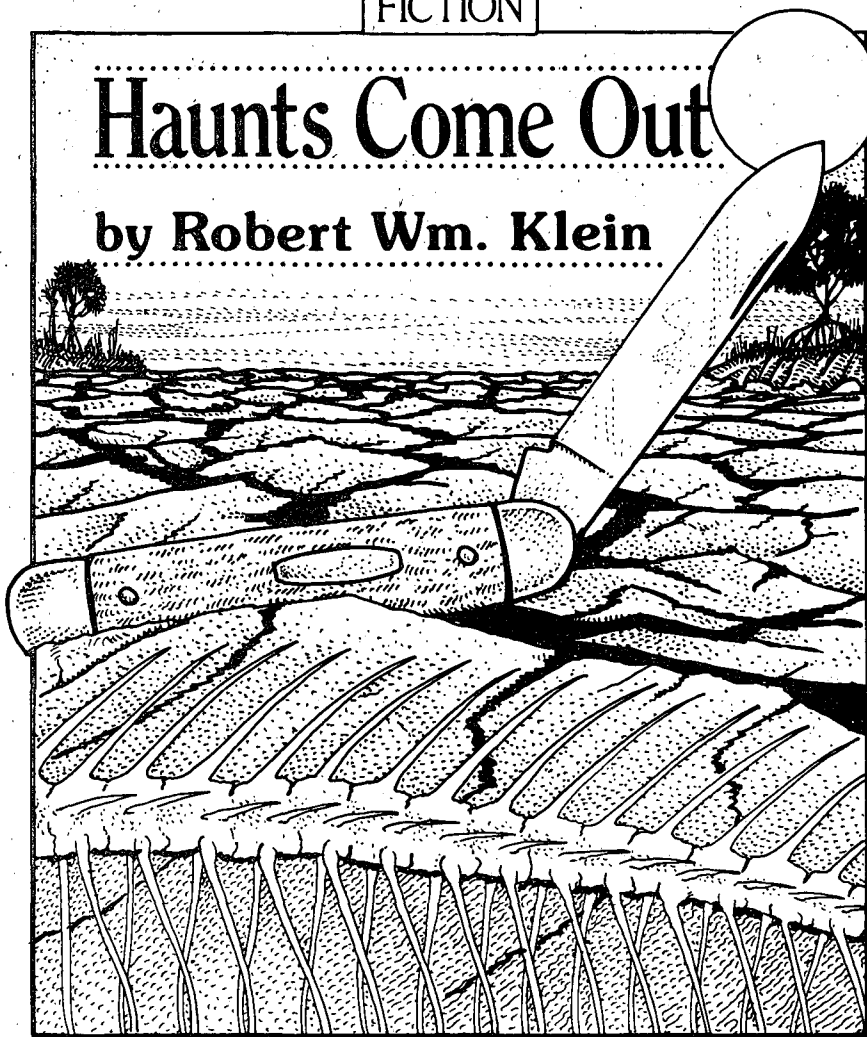
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# Haunts Come Out

by Robert Wm. Klein



**“H**aunts come out when the rains don’t come.”  
The drought had lasted all summer. By mid-August all of Grande Raton County lay embrowned and brittle under a dragon’s breath of heat. The scorched dead grass of once-luxuriant Florida lawns crackled underfoot. Gardens grew in reverse, shrinking and folding dun-colored back to the earth. Brush fires in the countryside cast a haze over well-to-do

suburbs. Cars overheated and horses collapsed in their stalls. The poor and the elderly sweltered and died under the tin roofs of their cracker houses.

Animals were strangely affected. Pets acted jumpy and restless; pet owners discovered their animals' water dishes commandeered by toads or rats. There were reports of wild dogs out by the river. People heard them howling at night like demons in the wilderness, spooking all the neighborhood dogs. The local dogs in turn would bark for hours, then drop panting and open-mouthed to the ground.

Odd stories circulated among the kids in the community. Even the adults repeated rumors of alligators tearing through screens to get into swimming pools, eating poodles and chihuahuas that stood in their way.

The children, too, seemed affected by the atmosphere. They were more excitable by day, more prone to bad dreams and screaming fits at night.

Something in the air, people said. It's the heat, they said. Wish it would rain. Wish we hadn't moved south. Is it like this every summer? Wish it would rain.

Oldtimers, the elders of the cracker, black, and Latino families that had lived in the county for generations, nodded ominously to themselves and silently recalled what their grandparents used to say: "Haunts come out when the rains don't come."

Ten days before school began, Jippo decided the time was right to visit the river.

"It's all dried up," he told Billy. "We can follow it like a trail. I say it's time for another expedition."

Expeditions were what they called their outings. Children played, adults walked, teenagers hung out, but Billy and Jippo explored. They cast themselves in the roles of latter-day scouts, hiking the woods and fields and railroad tracks beyond the suburban housing developments in which they lived.

"I can't," Billy said. "Not to the river. My parents won't let me."

"Why not?"

"I told 'em what happened last time."

"You wuss." Jippo's contempt stung Billy.

Billy and Jippo had been the new kids in the seventh grade at St. John Vianney last year. They were both military brats, and their fathers had recently been transferred to nearby Jannus Air Force Base. The boys' pairing at first had been the defensiveness of outsiders, the wary solidarity found in expatriates who, no mat-



ter what their differences, seek each other out in foreign countries. But their awkward alliance of convenience soon evolved into real friendship.

"Look," Jippo said, "just tell your folks we're hiking to the phosphate pits. They won't know where we're going."

"I can't lie to them."

"You gonna be an altar boy all your life? This is our last chance for an expedition. Summer's almost over."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"We can dig in the riverbed for fossils and stuff."

"Well, maybe . . ." Billy said.

"No maybe," Jippo said. "Yes or no. You coming with me or not?"

"Yeah, sure, Jippo. I guess. I'll come with you." Billy paused. "It'll be fun."

The expeditions had been Jippo's idea in the first place. One day during history class Sister Maureen was droning on about the Spanish conquistadors. She said Hernando DeSoto was believed to have passed through Grande Raton County in his northward quest for gold. Billy noticed Jippo had stopped doodling in his textbook and was paying attention to Sister.

"Let's pretend we're conquistadors," he told Billy later. "Maybe we can find the gold that the Spanish missed."

So one Saturday they made their first expedition. They hiked into the woods. They were out for just a couple of hours and they found no gold, but they were hooked. They devoted half a dozen weekends during the rest of the school year to exploring the hinterlands of the county.

At the start of summer vacation their expeditions became an almost-daily ritual. The drought, instead of being an impediment, created an advantage. There was no fear of the afternoon thunderstorms that usually drenched Florida during the rainy season.

The two boys would choose a destination, or, lacking a specific goal, they would simply pick a direction. The next morning, with their parents' permission, they'd leave at dawn, with lunches, thermoses, compasses, and other essentials stowed in backpacks, and not return home again until almost dusk.

"At least you don't have to worry about rain," Billy's father would say after checking the morning paper. "Just stay out of the sun. Mad dogs and Englishmen, you know."

They visited the abandoned railroad trestle over Covenan's Creek, and spent an afternoon idly dropping stones and spitting into the underbrush below. They timed how long it took a drop of

sweat to evaporate off the steel track.

The mined-out phosphate pits to the east of town were a sun-blasted desert—Billy remembered what his dad had said about mad dogs as his skin reddened and his head swirled in the heat—but the boys succeeded in digging up sharks' teeth and a handful of still-sharp arrowheads.

"Must have been plenty of Indians living around here," Jippo said.

"Guess they were wiped out," Billy said, studying an arrowhead. "Hey, I think there's blood on this one!"

They'd lay pennies on the tracks by Highway 268, and after the freight train from town would rumble by, at precisely ten thirty-two A.M., they'd retrieve the flattened pieces of copper. Sometimes the designs were still discernible, Lincoln's face or his Memorial stretched out like an imprint in Silly Putty.

Early one morning they saw a bobcat saunter by in an open field beside a tomato farm. Another time they caught a glimpse of a feral hog rooting along the edge of a freshwater marsh under a slash pine tree.

Once they spied a couple making out in the woods on a blanket spread with picnic food. Billy wanted to go, but Jippo said to quiet down and maybe they'd learn something. Billy remembered thinking that the couple's bottle of Coke would go flat if they didn't put the cap back on.

It was their expedition to the Alembic River that alarmed Billy's parents.

After trekking across a dusty pasture, ignored by a few cows lying in the shade of a withered tree, the boys had jumped a wire-and-post fence and cut a trail through the woods to the river. It wasn't difficult; the vegetation that blocked their way snapped at their touch. "Don't light any fires," Billy's dad had said. "They say there are tinderbox conditions out there."

The river lay at their feet like a sluggish brown snake. Ordinarily a good thirty feet across, the stream had been strangled by the drought to less than ten feet in width. Its extended banks stank and steamed in the sun.

"Pyu! Yuck!" Jippo bellowed as he fanned his arms in front of his face. "What died here?"

"Shhhh!" Billy hissed. "You hear something?"

"No, but I sure smell something. Bad enough to gag a maggot."

What was that? Billy strained to hear it again. The sound had come from the opposite side of the river. A low, almost subliminal,

suspension. A strangely familiar sound, something half-remembered from long ago.

Jippo sloshed loudly into the mud like a little kid at the beach. His steps released plops of pent-up gas from the slime, eliciting his cries of "Oh, crap!" and "Yech!"

Billy heard the sound again.

It was closer this time, a sighing wheeze that came from the opposite bank. Now he remembered why it sounded so familiar.

Billy used to own a dog, and when the dog slept, sometimes it would dream—you could tell by the way its hair bristled and its legs jerked—and it used to make a funny half-wheezing, half-growling sound . . . just like that sound across the river.

"Jippo! There's an animal nearby."

"Yeah, cows."

"No, this is . . ."

A full-throated yowl burst out of the underbrush twenty yards ahead of them across the river.

"Sheeeyit!" Jippo heard it this time. He twisted around, slipped to one knee, got up and leaped to Billy's side. "What the hell!"

"Wild dogs," Billy said.

"Let's go!" Jippo said. "Outta here! Fast."

They ran, retracing their steps into the woods. Fight or flight, Billy thought. *The adrenaline rush we learned about in science class.* Fight or flight.

They flew. Branches and twigs ripped and tore at their faces and clothes. A vine grabbed Billy's ankle, tripping him. He almost slammed his head on an exposed tree root. Jippo yanked him up by the arm, sobbing for breath.

Behind them the noises increased in volume. There were more than one of them, and whatever they were, they sounded more like a pack of werewolves than wild dogs. They weren't howling so much as growling and snapping and yammering the way sick animals do at the vet's. Probably slobbering at the mouth, Billy thought. Images from an old Lon Chaney movie flickered through his head.

Fight or flight, fight or flight. Where was that fence? The fence separating the woods from the cow pasture. How far was it? If they could just reach the damned fence, they'd be safe, Billy thought. Wouldn't they?

The fence, there it was, in front of them.

*We're gonna make it, we're gonna make it.*

The two boys vaulted the fence like a pair of screaming high

hurdlers. Home free, home free, Billy thought as he and Jippo hit the ground on the other side, kicking up clods of dried earth. They kept running.

"They're gone," Jippo coughed, and slowed to a fast stumble.

The noises had stopped. Several paces back. Like they'd suddenly given up.

Like the two boys had gotten beyond their reach.

"They never even crossed the river," Jippo said. "They never even crossed the river."

"How do you know?"

"We didn't hear them splashing across, right? They never got close to us."

"Mad dogs and Englishmen," Billy muttered.

"We're Americans. And we've just outrun a bunch of invisible dogs."

"Invisible?" Billy collapsed under the sparse shade of a shriveled tree. He noticed the cows were all on the other side of the pasture, far from the woods. They had been scared, too.

"We never saw them, did we? Musta been invisible dogs." Jippo let out a sigh and dropped to the ground by Billy. And stuck his elbow into a cowflop.

"Yeeuck!"

"Your mom and I think you'd better stay away from the river, son," his dad had said to him the next day. "Until Animal Control rounds up those dogs, we want you to confine your hikes to the other side of town."

By the middle of July the excitement of the Fourth had fizzled out like a dampened sparkler, replaced by the monotony of aimless summer. The heat enervated the two boys. Their daily expeditions became every-other-day expeditions, and then weekly expeditions, and then finally stopped altogether.

Instead Billy and Jippo hung out in the air-conditioned comfort of each other's bedrooms, building model planes, reading comic books, watching *I Love Lucy* reruns, and feeling childish and out of sorts with the world.

They made an odd couple. Billy was slight and physically immature, and still had "some growing up to do," as his mom phrased it. The adolescent rush of hormones that had yet to thrust its changes upon Billy had already pushed Jippo into puberty. Jippo was a hulking twelve-year-old who could do twenty pushups dou-

bletime and who once a week would shave the blond-to-the-point-of-invisible fuzz that gathered over his lips and on the tip of his chin.

For Billy girls were still an abstraction, but for Jippo the opposite sex represented a beckoning new world. Billy knew that when school began Jippo's loyalties would shift to that new world, a world to which Billy himself was not yet drawn.

But there would be time for all that later. For now the only discoveries to be found lay in hiking expeditions.

"It'll be fun," Billy'd said about this just-announced, forbidden expedition to the river. He sensed that it would be their last one together.

According to early explorers' maps the Alembic River had always been the smallest of Grande Raton's three rivers, a narrow, meandering stream that originated in the swamps to the north and drained out into the estuaries of the bay. Shallow and sluggish, the Alembic had never been suitable in the past for any navigation other than canoeing.

Oldtimers stayed away from the river. There had always been bad stories about it—vague and shifting tales of drownings, disappearances, and "haunts." None of the stories was verifiable, but all of them were sufficiently unsettling so that people in earlier times treated the Alembic as they would a graveyard at midnight.

In recent years, as the local population burgeoned, development encroached upon the swamps that fed the Alembic, lowering the river to the point that even canoes would sometimes scrape bottom. Conservationists, who of late had begun calling themselves environmentalists, labeled the Alembic a dying river. But they were the only ones who seemed concerned. Neither the oldtimers who kept their distance nor the newcomers who kept moving into the county from up north cared.

Billy woke at five, alert and ready as he never was on a school day. His dad would not have failed to label his breakfast "hearty"—orange juice, cornflakes, two cherry Pop-Tarts, a banana, and three Hostess mini-donuts. A lunch of two peanut butter sandwiches, an apple, a bag of chips, a Snickers bar

*for energy,*

*a thermos of not-too-cool water,*

*Don't want to get cramps from drinking ice water in the heat.*

*and a pop-top can of R.C. Cola in a wrap-around Styrofoam cooler*

all went into the backpack. They were followed by a compass, first aid kit,

*His mom insisted on that; sometimes he'd unpack it at Jippo's house before setting out.*

pocketknife, binoculars,

*Billy's face burned as he remembered how Jippo had borrowed this to watch the outdoor lovers more closely.*

matches, county map, and his still-unread copy of *The Little World of Don Camillo*

*which was on his eighth grade summer reading list, along with The Raft, Great Expectations, Tales of Poe, and The Scarlet Letter, all similarly unread.*

He walked out the front door just as his parents were stirring in their room. He set the paper in the carport for his dad—the headlines said something about American troops pulling out of Vietnam and a hurricane swirling in the Gulf—and headed to Jippo's house in the pre-dawn darkness.

A chorus of dogs began to howl. The flesh on the back of Billy's neck prickled, even though he knew that these were just the neighborhood dogs, hot and parched and spooked and miserable.

A wonder people haven't started shooting the mutts, Billy thought, distracting himself from the memory of those other sounds he and Jippo had heard. He tried to banish the Lon Chaney images that kept creeping through his head.

Kid stuff. What had he been told as a kid whenever he was scared? Say a prayer. A prayer.

Billy had told his folks last night he and Jippo were going to the phosphate pits. A little white lie. No need to feel guilty. Maybe he'd go to confession on Saturday. St. John Vianney was just around the corner. That was one of the reasons his mom liked the house they lived in—it was within walking distance of the church.

Billy often wondered if he had a vocation. The idea of being a priest had appealed to him ever since he'd first started going to church with his parents. Peeking between the shoulders and elbows of the people in front of him, he'd watch the priest say Mass and think, that's what I want to be when I grow up.

The reassuring rituals of prayer, the richness of the vestments, the smell of the incense, the ornamented beauty of the churches, the chill of holy water on the fingertips and forehead: these physical sensations—sacramentals, the nuns called them—had a homey comfort to them.

Billy enjoyed serving Mass, especially early morning weekday

Masses when there were only a handful of worshipers and he could concentrate on the liturgy and still watch the sunrise as it slowly irradiated the stained-glass windows of the nave.

Someday I'll see a miracle, he'd think. What kind of a miracle? Well, maybe if, at the moment of Consecration—no, better yet, at the lifting of the Host for adoration—maybe some God-focused sun-beam would fly like a laser beam from the window and strike the raised Eucharist. Or even better, the Host itself would emit a ray of light, a flash of colors, like the dancing sun at Fatima. A miracle that would put an end to the skeptics and atheists of the world. Or at least the ones in the church that morning.

But miracles didn't happen like that in real life.

What was it Monsignor McGillis had said about miracles the other day? Something about . . .

A dog yapped on the other side of a hedge. Billy jumped.

Damn, he thought, just a little lap dog. A Yorkie or a poodle. Don't get so excited. Calm down, calm down. Don't want Jippo to think you're scared. Although Jippo was pretty scared himself that day. Making those sobbing sounds as he helped me up. What a friend. He stopped to help me up when those growling *things* . . .

No, don't think of that. Calm down. Think of something else.

This is gonna be a great expedition. *If those things don't come out again.* Follow the dried-up river like a trail. What if we hear those sounds again? Dig for fossils and arrowheads. *Invisible wild dogs.* No problem. No danger. I've got my pocketknife. Jippo said he'd bring his camping axe. And we've outrun those things before. No problem.

The dogs in the neighborhood had calmed down by now. So had Billy.

But he was sweating already, and the sun hadn't even risen yet.

"Gonna be another scorcher," he said out loud. His voice sounded lonely and small, swallowed up among the suburban split-level and ranch houses that were starting to show signs of life as lights popped on in bedrooms and bathrooms and kitchens up and down the street. "Another scorcher."

Jippo's family lived in a house much like Billy's. Military families were as itinerant as gypsies, never getting a chance to settle down anywhere before it was time to pack up and leave again. Their houses reflected their lifestyle—middle-class rental properties just on the near side of respectability, furnished with inexpensive, easily transportable fixtures and crammed full of knickknacks and mementos from around the world.



Billy and Jippo had traveled in their young lives. The Air Force had taken their families to many of the same places—Kansas, North Dakota, Morocco, Texas, California, the Philippines, Hawaii, Germany—but it was only here in Florida, near the end of both their dads' twenty-year stints, that Billy and Jippo found each other in the same place at the same time.

"God works in mysterious ways," Billy's mom would say. Mysteries and miracles, two types of medieval plays, Billy recalled from class as he softly knocked his "shave-and-a-haircut" code on Jippo's front door.

"Hey, hey, hey, it's Billy Bear," Jippo announced to no one as he opened the door. "C'mon in, man, but keep it quiet."

Jippo's backpack lay on the floor, as heavily burdened as Billy's with provisions deemed essential for an expedition. His camping axe leaned significantly against the backpack, looking squat and ugly in the shadows.

"What's that?" Billy indicated a sheathed object hidden on the other side of Jippo's backpack.

"That, my fellow explorer, is what the French call the piece of resistance."

Jippo picked up what was indeed a sheath, one made of khaki-colored imitation leather. Out of it he pulled a dagger.

"Neato!"

Jippo flourished the blade like a fencer's epee. "Tough, isn't it?" he said. "My old man bought it at a flea market in Spain. Says it's an antique. Look at the carving on the handle."

Jippo passed the dagger to Billy. It was about eight inches long and wickedly sharp. The hilt was covered with curlicues worn smooth with use and apparently inlaid with silver. Billy dandled the weapon, lifting it carefully. It felt heavy and well-balanced. Obviously a work of craftsmanship. The blade glinted silver-white in the porch light that shone through the window.

"Neat." He handed it back to Jippo. "Your dad let you have it?"

"Your folks know where you're going today?"

"Yeah, okay, ask me no questions."

The white disc of the sun peered over the horizon as the two boys walked toward the fields beyond the suburbs. A few cloud wisps dotted the pale sky.

"They say that hurricane might break the drought," Billy said.

"Who's they? How do they know?" Jippo said.

"Everybody. The weather guy on TV. The newspapers."

"Yeah, right. I'll believe it when I see it." Jippo spat for emphasis.

"You ask me, I'd say this two-bit county'll dry up and blow away before it ever rains again."

They reached the cow pasture just before ten. The cows were gone. What was left of the grass lay flat against the ground like chopped yellow tobacco. The single shade tree stood spindly and dead against the backdrop of the forest beyond.

The forest itself was sickly and shriveled. The bilious yellow-green leaves on the trees drooped like flags at a funeral. The undergrowth crunched as the boys walked through it. Low-hanging branches snapped. Insects buzzed incessantly.

Billy and Jippo plodded on silently. This expedition is no adventure, Billy thought as he backhanded the sweat from his face. It's a chore, a punishment. He shouldn't have lied to his parents. It was only mid-morning and he was sweating and dirty and tired. He wanted to turn back. His thermos was half empty and he needed the rest of the water for the walk home. If they turned back now they'd be hiking in the midday sun. Although he had no appetite, he knew the apple could soothe his thirst. Mad dogs and Englishmen. No, don't even think of that.

Jippo wasn't enjoying this either. Billy could tell by his glum silence and the sour look on his face. This really is our last expedition, he thought. This is kid stuff. We're almost teenagers now.

They smelled the riverbed well before they saw it. It stank of putrefying fish and stagnant water, of death and wasteland.

"It really is dried up." Jippo stood over the riverbed with hands on hips, taking it all in.

Billy looked not at the river but at his companion and felt that he was seeing Jippo for the first time.

Jippo had matured in the few short weeks of the summer. Billy felt that sense of awe that schoolboys reserve for the natural athletes and leaders among their peers. Billy was smart—maybe the smartest kid in the whole school, certainly smarter than Jippo would ever be—and because he was smart Billy knew that he would never possess the confidence or the popularity or the easy grace that even now was apparent in Jippo's bearing and that would distinguish him through life.

Jippo stood above the Alembic, arms akimbo, and Billy imagined it must have been the way DeSoto stood when he first spied the Mississippi.

Only the Alembic was some kind of weird reverse image of the Mississippi, mud flats and cracked clay in place of flowing water.

"Think we can really follow it like a trail?" Billy asked doubtfully

as he surveyed the muck. "Doesn't look solid enough to walk on."

"Let's find out." Jippo stepped into the riverbed and started walking downstream. The dried mud surface cracked and splintered like thin ice under his boots. He sank about an inch into the underlying gunk.

"It'll hold," he said.

Billy followed.

They kept close to the edge of the banks for the first quarter mile or so. Scattered pools of water shimmered boglike in the middle of the riverbed. The bones of dead fish and turtles littered the surface. Rocks rose out of the mud like broken teeth.

It was midday and there was no shade where they walked. The humidity was intense. Billy's clothing clung to his body, while the steam rising from the riverbed's surface imbued the landscape with a wavering, otherworldly look.

Jippo veered to the middle of the river where the mud lay dark and wet. He marched forward, bending to examine some ooze, poking his father's dagger at a misshapen rock, all the while sloshing deeper into the muck.

Billy tagged wordlessly behind, not liking the way his boots squished and sank a little deeper with each step.

The stench of decaying matter was worse here than near the bank. Billy gagged. He tasted vomit at the back of his throat.

Throwing up might clear my head, he thought. Don't like the way the ground is pitching. Optical illusion. I feel awfully dizzy.

It was hard to walk. Billy's boots were ankle deep in gunk the consistency of curdled oatmeal. He had to yank his feet from the mud's grip. It reminded him of living in Topeka when the snow had piled up and he'd go wading through it with his dad, straining against the resistance of the cool white drifts. Yeah, that's right, think of how cold it was back then. Waiting for the school bus in below-zero temperatures, feeling your tears freeze up on your face like a mask, wondering if you were gonna die forgotten in a blizzard at the bus stop.

No use. It's too hot.

Sweat poured off Billy's forehead into his eyes, which were half shut against the glare. Mad dogs and Englishmen. Don't think that. Wild dogs. Invisible dogs. Heat stroke. I'm having a heat stroke.

"I think I'm gonna faint."

In his mind that's what Billy said, but his voice had only croaked. Jippo stood about ten yards ahead of Billy, but it was hard to

judge the distance in this wavering air. The ground between them was rolling in waves.

Waves?

Black waves of mud. An undulating ocean of tar. Bubbling and heaving like it was alive.

Like there's something under the surface. Something fighting its way up.

An optical illusion. Heat stroke. Mad dogs.

Billy took two more steps. Mud slopped over the tops of his boots and ran into his sweat-soaked socks.

Another step. Billy felt something under the mud brush against the top of his boot. A rock. Or a root. Something moving. No, how could anything be moving under the mud?

What's Jippo saying?

He's facing me now, but he's so far ahead of me I can barely make him out. His lips are moving. His face looks . . . exaggerated.

Jippo's waving his arms. What's he waving at? Is he waving at me? What's he shouting?

Howling. Something was howling on shore, something loud and mean, something that sounded familiar to Billy, something he'd heard once before. He knew that he should be scared, but he wasn't, because it sounded so far away and distorted, although he knew it was really close. Quite close.

Heat stroke. Mad dogs. Need to clear my head.

The mud all around Billy was roiling like a basket of snakes. He heaved his foot up and took another step.

Something grabbed his ankle.

Billy screamed.

He tried to pull his foot up, but whatever had grabbed him tightened its grip. It dug into his flesh.

And pulled.

Billy snapped down with a jerk, until he was up to his right knee in mud. His left leg sank of its own accord into the ground.

"Jippo!"

The grip loosened for a second, readjusted itself higher on Billy's leg and then pulled again.

"Ooph!" Billy fell forward onto his hands. His backpack banged against the back of his head. He clawed at the earth in front of him, tried to crawl away, but was dragged farther down.

He put his arms in a pushup position to right himself. He sank to his elbows in muck.

"Help!"

With his free leg he kicked at whatever held him and then something clutched at *that leg* and began tugging. Billy felt his jeans ripping. He dogpaddled in the mud with his arms. It was like swimming in molasses.

Quicksand. I'm gonna suffocate. Mom!

A good act of contrition.

*Oh my God, I'm heartily sorry . . .*

Mommy!

He was face down, horizontal and almost waist-deep, when the contents of his backpack spilled out in a halo in front of him. The thermos, the book, the apple, the sandwich, the can of R.C. Cola, the pocketknife all plopped into the mud.

*. . . for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins . . .*

The pocketknife.

Reach for it. Get it.

Billy yanked his right arm out of the ooze. His body weight shifted, and his left arm sank to the shoulder.

Another iron-hard, grasping hand caught hold of his belt and pulled.

*Hand? Are they hands? Or tentacles? Reaching up from the primordial slop of the riverbed to drag him under? Impossible. What the hell could they be?*

Where's Jippo? What happened to Jippo? Billy couldn't pull his head up to look.

*. . . because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell . . .*

Concentrate. Clear my head.

The noise. Wild dogs. The howling of demons. It sounded right at his ears.

Pocketknife. Billy swung his arm up, over and down.

And missed the knife. His hand splashed inches into the mud.

*. . . but most of all because I offended thee my God who art all good and deserving of all my love . . .*

Again. Up, over and down, like a spastic Australian crawl.

He missed the knife by an inch.

Now the front of his shirt had been grabbed. Not just his shirt, but the flesh of his abdomen was pinched and ripping in the grip of that thing.

*. . . I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin . . .*

He couldn't kick any more. His legs were held in half a dozen places. He could use only his arms now to rudder himself and resist the constant downward tug into a quicksand grave.

... Amen.

"Hold on, Billy!"

Jippo. Billy could see him running to him, sloshing in slow motion, knee deep in mud. In one hand he held a dark heavy object.

*the camping axe*

in the other hand something glinted silver-white in the sunlight.

*the dagger.*

At the risk of losing his resistance completely and being pulled under, Billy once more threw his right arm up, tossed it over, and brought it down.

Amen.

His fingers grappled and closed around the cheap plastic handle of the pocketknife. Now he had to open it. One-handed. He fumbled with the clasp, almost dropping the dearly won prize.

Amen.

"Hold on, Billy, hold on. I'm coming. What the hell!" Billy heard Jippo's footsteps falter. He looked up to see Jippo sink to his waist in one sudden motion, as though a trapdoor had sprung beneath him.

Now they've got *him*!

The knife in Billy's hand opened just as Jippo swung his axe viciously down at his own legs.

Something under the surface grabbed Billy's left elbow. Billy raised his right arm as high as he could, was rewarded by being pulled deeper into the muck so that his face was just inches from the suffocating mud, and then brought the blade of the knife down as hard as possible through the mud and into whatever was holding his other arm.

And stabbed himself in the left forearm.

Billy's head snapped back in pain, his mouth open and screaming. He looked straight up into the hot white eye of the sun.

Just one miracle, he prayed. Just one miracle.

Three days later the hurricane that had been careening across the Gulf of Mexico plowed into the Florida peninsula. Its hundred-mile-per-hour winds brought rain, six inches of it in a day. The drought that had lingered all summer died violently in a crescendo of storm and flood.

The spell was broken.

The rains came and the haunts went away.

And as the floodwaters poured into the Alembic riverbed and the drought-weakened trees along its banks snapped and crashed in

the wind, the search party for two lost boys was called off.

The man and the boy had been fishing all morning, and now the winter's sun was beginning to draw a sweat out of them. They floated silently in a flat-bottomed boat anchored near the mouth of the Alembic. The man had taken his young son to their favorite redfish hole as a holiday treat, a "men's day out" while Mom and the girls stayed home wrapping gifts and putting the last strands of angels' hair on the tree.

They'd made a good day's catch, about a dozen fat ones, and they were unpacking their lunch when the boy noticed something bobbing on the surface of the water, drifting out to the Gulf.

"Don't go picking up garbage like that, son," said the man.

"But look, Dad, it hasn't been opened," the boy said as he scooped up a soft drink can in a wraparound Styrofoam cooler. The can was bent and the bright colors on the cooler had faded. "Think it's any good?"

"Well, open it and see."

The boy pulled the ring tab off, and the brown liquid contents fizzed and foamed out.

They both laughed.

"Don't drink any of it," the man said. "Clean yourself off and put the can in the trash bag. R.C. Cola, eh? I used to drink that when I was your age."

The man turned to look upstream. "The river must wash a lot of stuff like that into the Gulf," he said dreamily. "Sure looks like unspoiled territory up there. Hey, son, how would you like to go camping out there next summer? Just us guys, out in the wilderness?"

"That'd be great, Dad!"

"And if the river dries up a mite, we can go hiking along the banks."

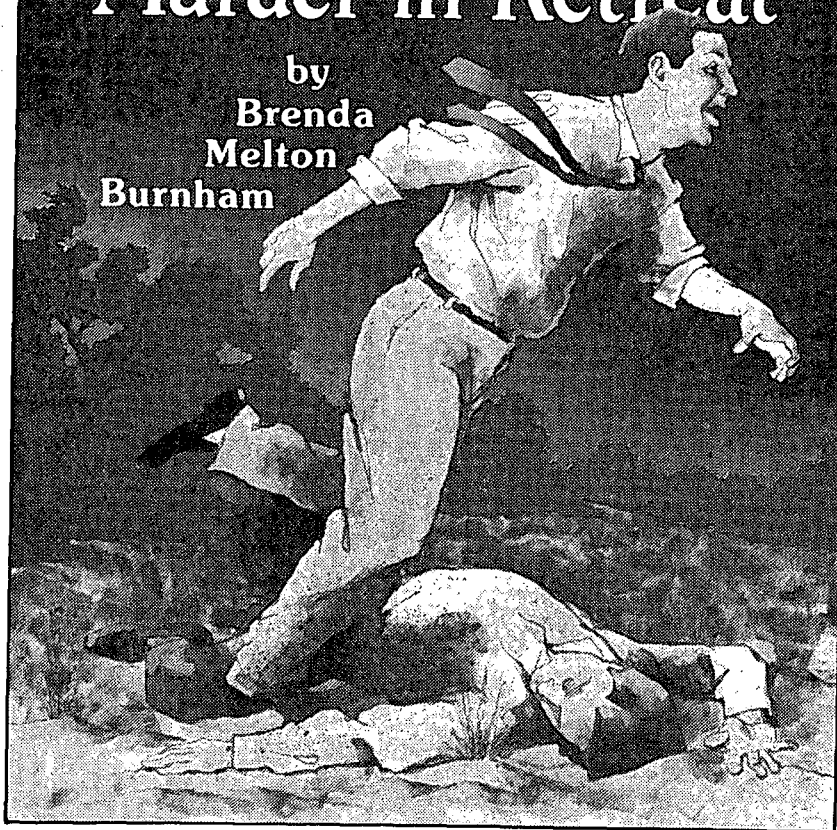
"Wow, Dad. You think we'll find a lot of neat stuff out there?"

"Well, son, you never know what you'll find when you go exploring."



# Murder in Retreat

by  
Brenda  
Melton  
Burnham



**D**arkness and drunkenness are relative terms. I am somewhat experienced at getting home safely while under the influence, but I was in strange territory and it was darker than the roots of my first wife's hair. One minute I was carefully

shuffling one foot in front of the other and the next minute my nose whacked the sand.

I uttered an appropriately descriptive phrase, raised the front half of me, and pulled the back half across the obstacle. Something about the action bothered me. I turned around

*Illustration by George Thompson*

on all fours like a dog and reached out. The soft feel of old wool, the shape of an arm . . . my hand drew back instinctively.

Never tell me I don't know a body when I trip over one. Just to make sure, I forced myself to examine the shape again. Moved my hand up the arm and along the jawline. Whoever it was, my fall hadn't caused him any pain. He, on the other hand, helped clear my head to a large degree.

Here we were, the two of us, at the famous Harrison House Annual Writers' Conference on the Oregon coast. Hardly where you might expect to meet a corpse.

I considered my options. I could stagger on until I found my cabin, which had been my original goal, and leave my newfound friend alone while I made a phone call—or head for the nearest door. I pushed myself into a more-or-less-erect position and tried to gauge where I was.

Impossible to tell. We were talking serious dark here. No moon, no stars, no streetlights, no city comforts. Off somewhere in the dune grass I heard something rustle.

That did it. I stumbled along until I arrived at a cabin, climbed the steps, and pounded on the door. Waited, then pounded again.

Lights came on inside. "Yes?" a voice said from behind the door.

I had to clear my throat before I could speak. "This is Max Wilhelm. Cabin Seven. Could I use your phone?"

No response.

"It's an emergency."

Nothing.

"Look, if you won't let me in, will you at least call the police? There's a problem here."

The door opened a crack and a body blocked some of the light. "Who did you say you are?"

"Max Wilhelm. 'Plotting the Mystery Novel.'"

"Lift your chin," the female voice commanded.

I obeyed.

"You're older than your pictures show," she said, opening the door.

I stepped inside. Even barefoot she was nearly as tall as I am, which at six feet made her no small chickie. Her dark hair was sleep-rumpled, her face nothing to write about. She clutched an old pink robe around her like a virtuous spinster.

"The phone?" I asked.

She pointed. I should have known. Our cabins had the same layout: small living room with couch, one easy chair, and a desk and chair against the front wall. Beyond the couch a hall led off on the right to the utilitarian kitchen and on the left

to the bedroom and bath.

She had a word processor sitting on her desk. I opened the middle drawer where I had found, and left, my local phone book. Yep, hers too.

"Seal Cove Police," a voice answered after the second ring.

"I'm calling from the Harrison property," I said. "I just tripped over a body on the beach. I'm at Cabin . . ." I turned to the woman.

"Twelve," she said calmly.

I repeated the number, gave my name as requested, and said yes, I would be here when they arrived. After I hung up, the two of us looked each other over. She was maybe in her early thirties, a good ten years younger than me. I did a mental search through the faces I'd seen in the past five days and attached a name to her: Susannah Blair, "Getting to the Heart of Your Romance Novel."

I knew what she saw: a man with thirty pounds too much weight, a crewcut going gray, and a nose that had been damaged several times before its most recent bumping this evening. I brushed sand off me and scuffed my feet on the already gritty linoleum.

"A body?"

"Yes."

"I see. I suppose, as a mystery writer, you are accustomed to this sort of thing?"

"Actually, this is my first."

"That's nice. Mine too," she said and dropped onto the couch like a sack of potatoes.

"Can I get you a drink of water or something?" I asked, not wanting her to keel over on me.

"No, thank you." She didn't move or raise her head. "I think, if you don't mind, I'd prefer you wait out front, on the steps."

Feeling somewhat maligned, I left her sitting there and went out to park my carcass where she'd suggested.

My being there was a fluke from the word go. In the past twenty years I've produced thirty-six books, under at least four pseudonyms, and managed to pay for two divorces. I never got a million dollar contract, but I never starved.

Up until the last two years, that is. That's how long my writer's block has lasted. I was nearly at the end of my tether when the call came from the Harrison people. Seems the guy they'd hired to do this year's mystery session had come down with a severe case of mumps, of all things, and they needed a last-minute replacement. Would I be interested?

Ordinarily, no. I'd never gone in for that sort of thing. But I was getting to the short end of my budget, and the right side of my brain still refused to function. Not only would I get paid, the place provided room and

board as well. How could I turn it down? Six weeks on the beach in July, to teach three consecutive two week courses on plotting a mystery? What the heck. I'd have been an idiot to turn it down.

Or so I'd thought, until now.

The lights of the police car interrupted my reverie. It came to a stop and two big young guys in snappy blue uniforms climbed out.

"Mr. Williams?" the driver said.

"Wilhelm. Max Wilhelm." I stood up and joined them at the car. "The body's down there." I pointed toward the beach.

The three of us walked down the path, following the beam of their flashlight. Sure enough, my old pal lay in a heap, the sand around him mucked up.

"I tripped over him," I explained, feeling somewhat foolish.

One of the officers knelt down and checked the body. "He's dead all right," he said to his partner. Then to me, "Who is he?"

"I don't know. I've never seen him before."

"What were you doing down here in the middle of the night? You know it's . . ." he looked at his watch, "eleven fifty-three."

"I walked up the beach to get a drink. I was coming home and there he was."

One of the men headed up the path to report. In the quiet you could hear the surf pounding. The guy who stayed with me proceeded to grill me on everything from when I'd eaten and where, to whose cabin I had called from.

Two more cars came down the beach along with an ambulance. Other official types arrived in the cabin area, by more conventional means. Before long it looked like a policemen's convention, with me and the body as the main topics of interest. After a while someone led me back to Cabin Twelve where Miss Blair, still in her robe, was doling out coffee. She handed me a cup, glanced at me briefly, and moved away.

The occupants of the other cabins, all reserved for instructors, had joined the party by now. Stanley Marsh, who wrote stuff nobody understood but everyone agreed was "meaningful"; Paul Mayorsky, "the poet of the masses"; Helen Katterle, children's stories; Bruce Clary, who did *the* definitive book on President Ford. No one offered me comfort. Since this was nothing new I wasn't terribly crushed.

Some guy in a windbreaker and Levis introduced himself as Captain Johannsen and suggested I might like to accompany him downtown. I didn't like, but it didn't matter.

The victim was a Brent Safferly, twenty-nine years of age and one of the students signed up for the first two week session. His head had been beaten in, and cops were still on the beach trying to find the weapon.

I'd never even heard of the guy before. Captain Johannsen, after checking my alibi thoroughly with the bartender, turned out to be a pretty decent guy. Somewhere in the second hour, we even shared a theory or two.

It was three thirty when I got back to my cabin. I slept in until class time and dealt with the curiosity of my students by using the occasion as an example of how to set up the discovery of a body in your novel.

I didn't mention the fact that I could still feel the clammy touch of the dead man on my hand. It might have been good data for fledgling writers, but I really wasn't up to discussing it yet.

At lunch I had a whole table all to myself. I was almost beginning to relish the notoriety when a female voice said, "May I join you?"

My eyes climbed her lean frame up to the face. While it was in better shape than earlier that morning, her outfit was god-awful. Long wrinkled stuff dyed strange muddy colors, it looked like castoffs from some strange cult. I missed the good

old days when women dressed to please men.

"Have a seat," I invited. "There's plenty of room."

"Congratulations," Susanah Blair said, after she'd gotten settled in.

I raised my eyebrows in a questioning look.

"The police haven't arrested you yet. I take it you are no longer a suspect?"

"Couldn't tell it by folks' reactions. But, yeah, the bartender confirmed I'd been sucking suds at the time the victim was clobbered. Not to mention I didn't know the guy from beans."

"Do you always talk like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like a bad imitation of Mickey Spillane."

I stopped chewing my sandwich and gave her a steely glance. "Do you always dress like a refugee?"

"I dress to suit myself, not some arrogant male."

Ha. I knew it. I'm not a mystery writer for nothing. I laid my next question on her. "Do you always take walks on the beach late at night?"

This one got more interesting results; she nearly dropped the roll she'd been buttering. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You had sand on your linoleum last night."

She went back to buttering, doing a heck of a job of it. We

both watched her perform the intricate task. "I went down to admire the sunset. They say Mr. Saferly was killed between ten and midnight."

"You may have gone down at sunset, but you went down again after that. The sand on your floor was still damp at midnight. I saw it."

"You must be a better detective than you are a writer."

I was about to respond when I noticed we had company. Bruce Clary, biographer of the mundane, chirped, "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all," the lady said. "Care to join us?"

Clary, a heavyset man with lots of gray hair, sat down and began to tamp his pipe. By the time it was going to his satisfaction, he got around to what he'd come to say. "Planning to write this up, are you, Wilhelm?"

"Hadn't thought about it yet, Clary." Dumb bugger. Who gave him the right to call me by my last name?

He hemmed and fussed with his pipe. Susannah Blair smiled a lot and chewed with her mouth shut. I concentrated on drinking my coffee without slurping. When I'd nearly run out of patience we were joined by Paul Mayorsky.

The guy looked more like an aging lineman than a man who'd scored with his first volume of

verse at the ripe old age of twenty-two. There are darn few successful poets in this country, and if they are all like this one, there should be even fewer of them. On paper his words may have soared (not being a poetry fan, I wouldn't know); in person I found him a great bore. (The fact that soar and bore rhyme—accidentally—is about the sum total of my ability as a poet.)

He dropped into the chair beside Susannah and beamed at me. "Well, old lad, you must be reveling in the atmosphere, eh? To think, your very own little mystery."

"Actually, old Clary here was thinking of claiming it as his."

"I merely asked a civil question," old Clary said huffily.

"I really must be going." Susannah Blair started to rise.

"Don't run away, Susannah," Paul said. "You don't think I came over here to talk to an ugly fellow like Wilhelm, do you? I was wondering if you'd care to join me for a drink later?"

I leaned back and relaxed. This was turning into more fun than I'd expected. "Actually, she's having a drink with me later. Sorry."

The lady could easily have shot me down, since we'd not discussed anything of the sort. Instead she surprised me by playing detective herself. "Mr.



Wilhelm and I were just discussing the murder. Did either of you have the victim in your class?"

"I did." Clary's pipe had gone out and he was fussing with it again. "Kid had promise. It's a real shame. I think a book could come of this. Talent destroyed and all that."

"That's a good one," Stanley Marsh joined in. He had, without a doubt, the biggest reputation among us. He also qualified for most obnoxious, being the type who enjoys cutting others down in order to make himself appear better.

He took the chair next to mine and continued his attack on Clary. "What would you know about talent wasted? You're the greatest example of overpaid mediocrity I've ever seen."

"Why? Because I write less than nine hundred pages, using words people can understand?"

The response was so perceptive Marsh was left looking a bit of a fool. Smart enough to know it, he changed the subject. "Saferly was very intense. Had visions of being the next Hemingway, which he wasn't remotely close to achieving in my opinion, but he certainly had drive and desire. I'm surprised I haven't heard of his being published. Has anyone?"

"He did a first novel, with a small publisher," Susannah

Blair said. "It didn't sell well. But definitely intense, as you said, Stanley, and undoubtedly autobiographical. Young man striving against an unkind world sort of thing."

"I thought it showed a lot of potential," Bruce added, still laboring to make his point.

"I agree with Stan," Paul Mayorsky said. "I haven't seen Saferly do anything that great. And he was nearly thirty. Of course, talent isn't something that can be learned. It's a gift. You either have it or you don't."

I snorted loudly and stood up. "If you'll excuse me, I have a class to conduct."

"No problem, old man," Mayorsky said. "You probably didn't have anything to contribute to this conversation anyway. Unless you wanted to tell us why you killed the lad."

"Everybody here seems to know more about him than I do. I never even heard of the guy. Did you run into him when you were down at the beach last night, Susannah?"

This last remark earned me a look that could chill an Eskimo and would undoubtedly have led to strong words, but Stan Marsh chimed in with the stupid comment, "Writing romantic fluff appears to do wonders for your social life, Susannah," and thus saved my neck.

The lady turned on him like



a mother lioness defending her cubs. "All of you delight so in laughing at 'romantic fluff,' but I'll put my readers—and my bank balance—up against yours any time." She rose with dignity and walked away.

It was an unanswerable exit line. The rest of us, chauvinistic males all, skulked off to our various classes without exchanging another word.

**A**s soon as the students had settled in for the afternoon session, I said, "Why was Brent Safely killed?"

I'd intended the question to be rhetorical, to kick off a discussion on reasons to commit murder and the importance of the victim in your story. My students took it literally.

"Didn't know him" vied with "We've only been here four days." I was about to explain my lead-in when a young man wearing a purple T-shirt with a mildly obscene suggestion on it said, "He was angry about something."

I may not be a teacher, but I know an opportunity when I hear one. "Okay, good, Mr. Parrish. How could you tell?"

Parrish gave some thought to his answer. "He didn't want anything to do with anybody, none of us. At first I thought he was just a snob, you know, already written the great Amer-

ican novel or something, but he had the room next to me in the dorm and I could hear him in there sometimes, banging things around and swearing." He paused, trying to find words to describe what he meant. When nothing inspired him he finished lamely, "Anyway, that's how I act when I'm angry."

"Very good. Anybody else?"

Mrs. Blanchett, a woman with untidy grey hair and size eighteen stretch jeans, said, "I sat with him at dinner the other night. At the time I simply thought he was rude. But now I agree with Mr. Parrish."

"I joined him because I was late and the rest of the tables were filled. I asked if he minded and he just grunted. I said something about how he liked the conference and he said, 'Oh, is that what this is? I thought it was a celebration of fame and immortality.' I remember the remark because it was so offensive. Why was he here if he disliked it so much?"

"I thought he was cute," Miss Hodge, a rather cute little thing herself, spoke up when Mrs. Blanchett finished. "I tried to talk to him a couple of times, but he didn't want anything to do with me. I figured it was because he looked down on me, seeing as how I want to write mysteries while he was doing serious stuff."

The guy must really have

been preoccupied if he hadn't been tempted by Miss Hodge's overtures—or else he was immune to the female sex. When no one else had anything to add, I said, "So, we don't know the reason he was killed. But there had to have been one. Remember, you're writers. What could it be? Mr. Carson?"

The group came up with everything from drugs to a twisted love affair and the session worked better than any of my previous ones.

Afterwards I hunted for Susannah Blair and found her with Helen Katterle, who was teaching a class on writing for juveniles. In a rare case of type-casting, she looks like, and is, a doting grandmother.

"Mr. Wilhelm, how dreadful for you, tripping over a body. But then, how marvelous for your muse. We writers are so self-centered, aren't we? I love my grandchildren dearly, but every time I'm around them I find myself thinking, 'Oh yes. I can use this in a story.'"

"Most of the stuff I write comes from an overactive imagination." It hadn't been active for a long time now, but I didn't mention that.

"Certainly most romance writers I know don't write from real life," Susannah said with a wry laugh. "Ours is definitely a fantasy world."

We talked briefly about writ-

ing, then drifted back to Brent Saferly's death. "Did you know him?" I asked Helen.

"Not really. He wasn't interested in my small field of expertise. My students naturally spoke of him, poor boy. It's not healthy to want something desperately, I think. One is almost always disappointed. Goodness, it's getting on. I must go. Will I see you at dinner?"

"I don't think so," I said. "We're going into town."

"Well, then, I won't keep you," Helen said and walked away. I took Susannah's arm and led her in the direction of the cabins, hoping she'd wait until we were out of public view before exploding.

She did. Barely. "Are you always such an arrogant ass?" she demanded, pulling away from my grasp.

"Don't romance writers like their men forceful?"

"On paper maybe. In real life I find it extremely rude."

"Why'd you let me get by with it then? I can't believe you're that hard up for male companionship."

"What a clever phrase, 'hard up for male companionship.' I should've thought, being a writer, you could come up with something more original than that old cliché."

I'd never run into a woman who could argue without yelling before. I wasn't too sure I

liked a woman who could fight like a man. Besides, I was blowing my plans for the evening right out of the water. The gal had a point; there's a time and place for forceful.

"I'm sorry," I said, the words stumbling over my tongue. Apologies have never been my strong suit. "I don't fall over a dead body every day."

"That's about the lamest excuse I've ever heard. I should think you'd find it exciting; as Helen said, 'stimulating to your muse.'"

"My muse hasn't spoken to me for so long I think it may have divorced me." I'm still not sure what triggered my bitter comment, but at least the lady knew truth when she heard it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What time shall I be ready for dinner?"

I picked a little seafood house that overlooked the beach and got lucky. The drinks were strong, the salmon delicious. When I had gone to pick Susannah up at her cabin, I asked, "Would you like to drive, or shall we walk down the beach?"

She only hesitated for a minute. "The main reason I took this job was to be near the ocean. Let's walk."

"You look nice tonight," I said when we were strolling along the dunes. She did, too, in a brightly flowered long dress

with a red jacket and beads to match.

"Thank you."

That had been the substance of our conversation. Over the drinks we sat and watched the surf crash against the sand. I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't start another battle, and she didn't seem to need chitchat. During dinner I ventured a few comments, scrupulously avoiding the murder. She responded stiffly, but politely.

After we finished the last of our salmon, I asked if she'd care for a brandy.

"I might as well, if you're going to question me—or should I say grill me, since you're the tough detective? That is what this is all about, isn't it? I mean, it's not as though you're overcome with desire for me."

"I find you quite attractive ..."

The waitress interrupted at that point to clear our plates. I ordered the brandies and got through the awkward moment. Susannah was quite right. I had invited her out in order to "grill" her.

Neither of us said anything while we waited. She seemed fascinated with the view of the ocean while I watched two old ladies argue over who got the check.

The waitress returned with our snifters and departed. The

old ladies reached a decision and left. I joined Susannah in staring out the window. Foam from the surf glowed in the dark.

"You're right," she said abruptly, without preamble. "I was down at the beach a second time last night. I couldn't sleep, and I had a great idea for a plot trying to surface." She broke off for a moment before continuing. "I didn't see anything. Not really. It was pitch black. But as I came around the side of my cabin on the way back, I heard a door slam and footsteps crunching along.

"I hate to disappoint you, but I've already told the police all this. They kept trying for more: Was it a man? A woman? Did I see anything, anything at all? It was no use. I heard what I heard. That's all."

"What time was this?"

"I don't know. Eleven, maybe. I didn't think anything about it until you showed up and I realized what . . . I had almost interrupted." She shivered and took a drink.

Whether it was my confession or hers or simply the brandy, the friction between us had dissipated.

"Well, that certainly ties it close to home," I said. "It might have been Saferly, of course, but if it was he'd been visiting one of us. One of the instructors."

"Somehow I can't see Helen Katterle bopping him over the head. Can you?"

No, I agreed. I couldn't. Of the three others—Clary, Marsh, and Mayorsky—Marsh, a slight man, was probably the least likely.

"Unless . . ." Susannah paused. "What do you know about Stan's private life? Is he married?"

"I don't know, why? Oh, you mean could it have been a lover's quarrel? It's hard for me to picture Stan romantically involved with anyone, male or female, other than himself. He is so ungodly pretentious and offensive, he'd make a much more likely corpse than a murderer."

Over two more brandies we tossed ideas around. With the next two we came up with insane and ridiculous motives for everyone, even Helen Katterle and ourselves. Me because he was blackmailing me over an affair with his sister, whom I'd led into shame and then deserted, and Susannah because he was going to tell that she hadn't really written her books; her father had. It was turning out to be a very satisfactory evening. Her comments had helped strike sparks off the part of my brain I'd been fearing was long dead.

Before we left the restaurant I made a necessary side trip,

then joined my companion at the door. Outside the darkness was total, the silver gleam of watery foam our only guide.

"You're not nervous about walking back?" I asked, wondering what I'd do if she said yes.

She didn't. "With a big mystery writer beside me? Lead on, Max the Mighty."

By this time we were half intoxicated by liquor and the other half by the flowing of our creative juices. Before long I began to regret not having brought a flashlight with me, but it was too late. Besides, I had my arm around the lady, she was laughing, the roar of the surf echoed all around us, the night promised more . . .

Those aren't very good excuses, I know. When the blow landed, I fell forward, taking Susannah down with me. People always think of sand as nice and soft. It's not. It's also lousy for quick recoveries or fancy moves. I tried to scramble to my feet while pushing her body away from me and the attacker at the same time. As I got to my knees he hit me again. Hard.

Susannah screamed and lashed out with her long legs. She must have caught him somewhere because I heard him grunt. I struggled upright and threw a punch that connected with a sudden jar.

I sensed rather than saw him

draw back for another strike when the floodlights hit us. "Don't move. We've got you surrounded," Captain Johannsen's voice boomed.

Paul Mayorsky dropped the slab of driftwood and fell to his knees with a sob.

**W**e were having a brandy and coffee in Susannah's cabin. The police had taken the mad poet away, after thanking us for our cooperation. Mayorsky had continued to claim he didn't mean to kill anyone, that Saferly drove him to it.

"Can you imagine stealing someone else's work and publishing it as your own?" Susannah shook her head. "That's awful."

The part of me that had suffered through two long years of writer's block sympathized. "Saferly's poem was from nearly ten years ago, when he was Mayorsky's student at a small local college. When you make it big as Paul had, at an early age, I imagine there's a lot of pressure on you to keep doing more and better work all the time." I paused. "Maybe he just ran across the piece again recently, at a time when he was desperate. You know, figured what the heck, the kid's probably forgotten he ever wrote the thing."

"You're sympathizing with a

man who killed someone? *After* he'd stolen his poetry? That's sick."

"Well, you have to admit Safferly was pretty stupid. Why didn't he just get a lawyer and sue for plagiarism? That's the logical thing to do. But no, he had to confront his nemesis. And on an isolated beach? Late at night? That's dumb."

She surprised me by saying meekly, "I suppose," which lulled me into a vulnerable position. Then she proceeded to attack. "So, inviting me for dinner and drinks, coming back along the beach—the whole thing—was all a trap set up between you and the captain?"

"Not exactly," I said lamely. "Once Johannsen accepted the fact it wasn't me, we kept coming back to the wet sand on your floor . . ."

"You told the police you thought I killed him?"

"Hey, I didn't know you then, okay? Besides, you'd already given them the information, so to them it was no big deal. But Johannsen thought the murderer might not realize you hadn't seen him. That's probably why Mayorsky invited you to go for a drink; to find out if you'd seen him. Anyway, Johannsen insisted on being

around while I, um, grilled you."

"And here I thought I'd suddenly become so attractive I had two men fighting over me."

The camaraderie we'd established earlier in the evening was rapidly deteriorating. "We did fight over you. Sort of."

"Oh yes, over the top of me. I hope you noticed I was the one who got in the first blow after he attacked us."

I'd noticed. I just didn't want to talk about it any more. I had other things on my mind.

Apparently the lady didn't. "Do you realize how . . . used I feel? Being tested by you and protected without my knowledge by Johannsen? Are you totally incapable of thinking of a woman as anything other than an object?"

"Look, I . . ."

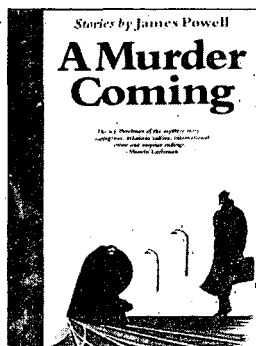
"You'd better get one thing straight, buddy . . ." She got up and stood over me, hands on her hips. I tensed, ready to leave before I got thrown out. This gal was big enough to do a lot of damage. "If you and I are going to have any sort of friendship at all," she said, "you're going to have to deal with the fact that sometimes it'll be on my terms."

She leaned down and planted a big kiss right on me.

See the 5 star review in the January issue of EQMM!

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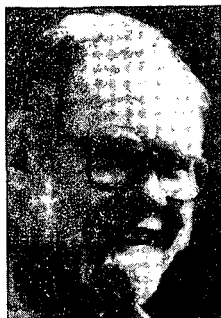


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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Scandal Detectives

by F. Scott Fitzgerald



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

It was a hot afternoon in May and Mrs. Buckner thought that a pitcher of fruit lemonade might prevent the boys from filling up on ice cream at the drugstore. She belonged to that generation, since retired, upon whom the great revolution in American family life was to be visited; but at that time she believed that her children's relation to her was much as hers had been to her parents, for this was more than twenty years ago.

Some generations are close to those that succeed them; between others the gap is infinite and unbridgeable. Mrs. Buckner—a woman of character, a member of Society in a large Middle-Western city—carrying a pitcher of fruit lemonade through her own spacious back yard, was progressing across a hundred years. Her own thoughts would have been comprehensible to her great-grandmother; what was happening in a room above the stable would have been entirely unintelligible to them both. In what had once served as the coachman's sleeping apartment, her son and a friend were now behaving in a normal manner, but were, so to speak, experimenting in a void. They were making the first tentative combinations of the ideas and materials they found readily at their hand—ideas destined to become, in future years, first articulate, then startling, and finally commonplace. At the moment when she called up to them they were sitting with disarming quiet upon the still unhatched eggs of the mid-twentieth century.

Riply Buckner descended the ladder and took the lemonade. Basil Duke Lee looked abstractedly down at the transaction and said, "Thank you very much, Mrs. Buckner."

"Are you sure it isn't too hot up there?"

"No, Mrs. Buckner. It's fine."

It was stifling; but they were scarcely conscious of the heat, and they drank two tall glasses each of the lemonade without knowing that they were thirsty. Concealed beneath a sawed-out trapdoor from which they presently took it was a composition book bound in imitation red leather which currently absorbed much of their attention. On its first page was inscribed, if you penetrated the secret of the lemon juice ink: "The Book of Scandal, written by Riply Buckner, Jr., and Basil D. Lee, Scandal Detectives."

In this book they had set down such deviations from rectitude on the part of their fellow citizens as had reached their ears. Some of these false steps were those of grizzled men, stories that had

become traditions in the city and were embalmed in the composition book by virtue of indiscreet exhumations at family dinner tables. Others were the more exciting sins, confirmed or merely rumored, of boys and girls their own age. Some of the entries would have been read by adults with bewilderment, others might have inspired wrath, and there were three or four contemporary reports that would have prostrated the parents of the involved children with horror and despair.

One of the mildest items, a matter they had hesitated about setting down, though it had shocked them only last year, was: "Elwood Leaming has been to the Burlesque Show three or four times at the Star."

Another, and perhaps their favorite, because of its uniqueness, set forth that "H. P. Cramner committed some theft in the East he could be imprisoned for and had to come here"—H. P. Cramner being now one of the oldest and "most substantial" citizens of the city.

The single defect in the book was that it could only be enjoyed with the aid of the imagination, for the invisible ink must keep its secrets until that day when, the pages being held close to the fire, the items would appear. Close inspection was necessary to determine which pages had been used—already a rather grave charge against a certain couple had been superimposed upon the dismal facts that Mrs. R. B. Cary had consumption and that her son, Walter Cary, had been expelled from Pawling School. The purpose of the work as a whole was not blackmail. It was treasured against the time when its protagonists should "do something" to Basil and Riply. Its possession gave them a sense of power. Basil, for instance, had never seen Mr. H. P. Cramner make a single threatening gesture in Basil's direction, but let him even hint that he was going to do something to Basil and there preserved against him was the record of his past.

It is only fair to say that at this point the book passes entirely out of this story. Years later a janitor discovered it beneath the trapdoor, and finding it apparently blank, gave it to his little girl; so the misdeeds of Elwood Leaming and H. P. Cramner were definitely entombed at last beneath a fair copy of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

The book was Basil's idea. He was more the imaginative and in most ways the stronger of the two. He was a shining-eyed, brown-haired boy of fourteen, rather small as yet, and bright and lazy at school. His favorite character in fiction was Arsène Lupin, the

gentleman burglar, a romantic phenomenon lately imported from Europe and much admired in the first bored decades of the century.

Riply Buckner, also in short pants, contributed to the partnership a breathless practicality. His mind waited upon Basil's imagination like a hair trigger and no scheme was too fantastic for his immediate "Let's do it!" Since the school's third baseball team, on which they had been pitcher and catcher, decomposed after an unfortunate April season, they had spent their afternoons struggling to evolve a way of life which should measure up to the mysterious energies fermenting inside them. In the cache beneath the trapdoor were some "slouch" hats and bandanna handkerchiefs, some loaded dice, half of a pair of handcuffs, a rope ladder of a tenuous crochet persuasion for rear-window escapes into the alley, and a makeup box containing two old theatrical wigs and crêpe hair of various colors—all to be used when they decided what illegal enterprises to undertake.

Their lemonades finished, they lit Home Runs and held a desultory conversation which touched on crime, professional baseball, sex, and the local stock company. This broke off at the sound of footsteps and familiar voices in the adjoining alley.

From the window, they investigated. The voices belonged to Margaret Torrence, Imogene Bissel, and Connie Davies, who were cutting through the alley from Imogene's back yard to Connie's at the end of the block. The young ladies were thirteen, twelve, and thirteen years old respectively, and they considered themselves alone, for in time to their march they were rendering a mildly daring parody in a sort of whispering giggle and coming out strongly on the finale: "Oh, my dar-ling Clemen-tine."

Basil and Riply leaned together from the window, then remembering their undershirts, sank down behind the sill.

"We heard you!" they cried together.

The girls stopped and laughed. Margaret Torrence chewed exaggeratedly to indicate gum, and gum with a purpose. Basil immediately understood.

"Whereabouts?" he demanded.

"Over at Imogene's house."

They had been at Mrs. Bissel's cigarettes. The implied recklessness of their mood interested and excited the two boys and they prolonged the conversation. Connie Davies had been Riply's girl during dancing school term; Margaret Torrence had played a part in Basil's recent past; Imogene Bissel was just back from a year in Europe. During the last month neither Basil nor Riply had

thought about girls, and, thus refreshed, they became conscious that the center of the world had shifted suddenly from the secret room to the little group outside.

"Come on up," they suggested.

"Come on out. Come on down to the Whartons' yard."

"All right."

Barely remembering to put away the Scandal Book and the box of disguises, the two boys hurried out, mounted their bicycles, and rode up the alley.

The Whartons' own children had long grown up, but their yard was still one of those predestined places where young people gather in the afternoon. It had many advantages. It was large, open to other yards on both sides, and it could be entered upon skates or bicycles from the street. It contained an old seesaw, a swing, and a pair of flying rings; but it had been a rendezvous before these were put up, for it had a child's quality—the thing that makes young people huddle inextricably on uncomfortable steps and desert the houses of their friends to herd on the obscure premises of "people nobody knows." The Whartons' yard had long been a happy compromise; there were deep shadows there all day long and ever something vague in bloom, and patient dogs around, and brown spots worn bare by countless circling wheels and dragging feet. In sordid poverty, below the bluff two hundred feet away, lived the "micks"—they had merely inherited the name, for they were now largely of Scandinavian descent—and when other amusements palled, a few cries were enough to bring a gang of them swarming up the hill, to be faced if numbers promised well, to be fled from into convenient houses if things were the other way.

It was five o'clock and there was a small crowd gathered there for that soft and romantic time before supper—a time surpassed only by the interim of summer dusk thereafter. Basil and Riply rode their bicycles around abstractedly, in and out of trees, resting now and then with a hand on someone's shoulder, shading their eyes from the glow of the late sun that, like youth itself, is too strong to face directly, but must be kept down to an undertone until it dies away.

Basil rode over to Imogene Bissel and balanced idly on his wheel before her. Something in his face then must have attracted her, for she looked up at him, looked at him really, and slowly smiled. She was to be a beauty and belle of many proms in a few years. Now her large brown eyes and large beautifully shaped mouth and the high flush over her thin cheekbones made her face gnome-like

and offended those who wanted a child to look like a child. For a moment Basil was granted an insight into the future; the spell of her vitality crept over him suddenly. For the first time in his life he realized a girl completely as something opposite and complementary to him, and he was subject to a warm chill of mingled pleasure and pain. It was a definite experience and he was immediately conscious of it. The summer afternoon became lost in her suddenly—the soft air, the shadowy hedges and banks of flowers, the orange sunlight, the laughter and voices, the tinkle of a piano over the way—the odor left all these things and went into Imogene's face as she sat there looking up at him with a smile.

For a moment it was too much for him. He let it go, incapable of exploiting it until he had digested it alone. He rode around fast in a circle on his bicycle, passing near Imogene without looking at her. When he came back after a while and asked if he could walk home with her, she had forgotten the moment, if it had ever existed for her, and was almost surprised. With Basil wheeling his bicycle beside her, they started down the street.

"Can you come out tonight?" he asked eagerly. "There'll probably be a bunch in the Whartons' yard."

"I'll ask Mother."

"I'll telephone you. I don't want to go unless you'll be there."

"Why?" She smiled at him again, encouraging him.

"Because I don't want to."

"But why don't you want to?"

"Listen," he said quickly. "What boys do you like better than me?"

"Nobody. I like you and Hubert Blair best."

Basil felt no jealousy at the coupling of this name with his. There was nothing to do about Hubert Blair but accept him philosophically, as other boys did when dissecting the hearts of other girls.

"I like you better than anybody," he said deliriously.

The weight of the pink dappled sky above him was not endurable. He was plunging along through air of ineffable loveliness while warm freshets sprang up in his blood and he turned them, and with them his whole life, like a stream toward this girl.

They reached the carriage door at the side of her house.

"Can't you come in, Basil?"

"No." He saw immediately that that was a mistake, but it was said now. The intangible present had eluded him. Still he lingered.

"Do you want my school ring?"

"Yes, if you want to give it to me."

"I'll give it to you tonight." His voice shook slightly as he added, "That is, I'll trade."

"What for?"

"Something."

"What?" Her color spread; she knew.

"You know. Will you trade?"

Imogene looked around uneasily. In the honey-sweet silence that had gathered around the porch, Basil held his breath.

"You're awful," she whispered. "Maybe . . . Goodbye."

## II

It was the best hour of the day now and Basil was terribly happy. This summer he and his mother and sister were going to the lakes and next fall he was starting away to school. Then he would go to Yale and be a great athlete, and after that—if his two dreams had fitted onto each other chronologically instead of existing independently side by side—he was due to become a gentleman burglar. Everything was fine. He had so many alluring things to think about that it was hard to fall asleep at night.

That he was now crazy about Imogene Bissel was not a distraction, but another good thing. It had as yet no poignancy, only a brilliant and dynamic excitement that was bearing him along toward the Wharton yard through the May twilight.

He wore his favorite clothes—white duck knickerbockers, pepper-and-salt Norfolk jacket, a Belmont collar and a gray knitted tie. With his brown hair wet and shining, he made a handsome little figure as he turned in upon the familiar but not reenchanting lawn and joined the voices in the gathering darkness. Three or four girls who lived in neighboring houses were present, and almost twice as many boys; and a slightly older group adorning the side verandah made a warm, remote nucleus against the lamps of the house and contributed occasional mysterious ripples of laughter to the already overburdened night.

Moving from shadowy group to group, Basil ascertained that Imogene was not yet here. Finding Margaret Torrence, he spoke to her aside, lightly.

"Have you still got that old ring of mine?"

Margaret had been his girl all year at dancing school, signified by the fact that he had taken her to the cotillion which closed the season. The affair had languished toward the end; nonetheless, his question was undiplomatic.



"I've got it somewhere," Margaret replied carelessly. "Why? Do you want it back?"

"Sort of."

"All right. I never did want it. It was you that made me take it, Basil. I'll give it back to you tomorrow."

"You couldn't give it to me tonight, could you?" His heart leaped as he saw a small figure come in at the rear gate. "I sort of want to get it tonight."

"Oh, all right, Basil."

She ran across the street to her house and Basil followed. Mr. and Mrs. Torrence were on the porch, and while Margaret went upstairs for the ring he overcame his excitement and impatience and answered those questions as to the health of his parents which are so meaningless to the young. Then a sudden stiffening came over him, his voice faded off, and his glazed eyes fixed upon a scene that was materializing over the way.

From the shadows far up the street, a swift, almost flying figure emerged and floated into the patch of lamplight in front of the Whartons' house. The figure wove here and there in a series of geometric patterns, now off with a flash of sparks at the impact of skates and pavement, now gliding miraculously backward, describing a fantastic curve, with one foot lifted gracefully in the air, until the young people moved forward in groups out of the darkness and crowded to the pavement to watch. Basil gave a quiet little groan as he realized that of all possible nights, Hubert Blair had chosen this one to arrive.

"You say you're going to the lakes this summer, Basil. Have you taken a cottage?"

Basil became aware after a moment that Mr. Torrence was making this remark for the third time.

"Oh, yes, sir," he answered—"I mean, no. We're staying at the club."

"Won't that be lovely?" said Mrs. Torrence.

Across the street, he saw Imogene standing under the lamppost and in front of her Hubert Blair, his jaunty cap on the side of his head, maneuvering in a small circle. Basil winced as he heard his chuckling laugh. He did not perceive Margaret until she was beside him, pressing his ring into his hand like a bad penny. He muttered a strained hollow goodbye to her parents, and, weak with apprehension, followed her back across the street.

Hanging back in a shadow, he fixed his eyes not on Imogene but on Hubert Blair. There was undoubtedly something rare about

Hubert. In the eyes of children less than fifteen, the shape of the nose is the distinguishing mark of beauty. Parents may call attention to lovely eyes, shining hair, or gorgeous coloring, but the nose and its juxtaposition on the face is what the adolescent sees. Upon the lithe, stylish, athletic torso of Hubert Blair was set a conventional chubby face, and upon his face was chiseled the piquant, retroussé nose of a Harrison Fisher girl.

He was confident; he had personality, uninhibited by doubts or moods. He did not go to dancing school—his parents had moved to the city only a year ago—but already he was a legend. Though most of the boys disliked him, they did homage to his virtuosic athletic ability, and for the girls his every movement, his pleasantries, his very indifference, had a simply immeasurable fascination. Upon several previous occasions Basil had discovered this; now the discouraging comedy began to unfold once more.

Hubert took off his skates, rolled one down his arm and caught it by the strap before it reached the pavement; he snatched the ribbon from Imogene's hair and made off with it, dodging from under her arms as she pursued him, laughing and fascinated, around the yard. He cocked one foot behind the other and pretended to lean an elbow against a tree, missed the tree on purpose and gracefully saved himself from falling. The boys watched him non-committally at first. Then they, too, broke out into activity, doing stunts and tricks as fast as they could think of them until those on the porch craned their necks at the sudden surge of activity in the garden. But Hubert coolly turned his back on his own success. He took Imogene's hat and began setting it in various quaint ways upon his head. Imogene and the other girls were filled with delight.

Unable any longer to endure the nauseous spectacle, Basil went up to the group and said, "Why, hello, Hube," in as negligent a tone as he could command.

Hubert answered: "Why, hello, old—old Basil the Boozle," and set the hat a different way on his head, until Basil himself couldn't resist an unwilling chortle of laughter.

"Basil the Boozle! Hello, Basil the Boozle!" The cry circled the garden. Reproachfully he distinguished Riply's voice among the others.

"Hube the Boob!" Basil countered quickly; but his ill humor detracted from the effect though several boys repeated it appreciatively.

Gloom settled upon Basil, and through the heavy dusk the figure of Imogene began to take on a new, unattainable charm. He was

a romantic boy and already he had endowed her heavily from his fancy. Now he hated her for her indifference, but he must perversely linger near in the vain hope of recovering the penny of ecstasy so wantonly expended this afternoon.

He tried to talk to Margaret with decoy animation, but Margaret was not responsive. Already a voice had gone up in the darkness calling in a child. Panic seized upon him; the blessed hour of summer evening was almost over. At a spreading of the group to let pedestrians through, he maneuvered Imogene unwillingly aside.

"I've got it," he whispered. "Here it is. Can I take you home?"

She looked at him distractedly. Her hand closed automatically on the ring.

"What? Oh, I promised Hubert he could take me home." At the sight of his face she pulled herself from her trance and forced a note of indignation. "I saw you going off with Margaret Torrence just as soon as I came into the yard."

"I didn't. I just went to get the ring."

"Yes, you did! I saw you!"

Her eyes moved back to Hubert Blair. He had replaced his roller skates and was making little rhythmic jumps and twirls on his toes, like a witch doctor throwing a slow hypnosis over an African tribe. Basil's voice, explaining and arguing, went on, but Imogene moved away. Helplessly he followed. There were other voices calling in the darkness now and unwilling responses on all sides.

"All right, Mother!"

"I'll be there in a second, Mother."

"Mother, can't I please stay out five minutes more?"

"I've got to go," Imogene cried. "It's almost nine."

Waving her hand and smiling absently at Basil, she started off down the street. Hubert pranced and stunted at her side, circled around her and made entrancing little figures ahead.

Only after a minute did Basil realize that another young lady was addressing him.

"What?" he demanded absently.

"Hubert Blair is the nicest boy in town and you're the most conceited," repeated Margaret Torrence with deep conviction.

He stared at her in pained surprise. Margaret wrinkled her nose at him and yielded up her person to the now-insistent demands coming from across the street. As Basil gazed stupidly after her and then watched the forms of Imogene and Hubert disappear around the corner, there was a low mutter of thunder along the sultry sky and a moment later a solitary drop plunged through the

lamplit leaves overhead and splattered on the sidewalk at his feet. The day was to close in rain.

### III

It came quickly and he was drenched and running before he reached his house eight blocks away. But the change of weather had swept over his heart and he leaped up every few steps, swallowing the rain and crying "Yo-o-o!" aloud, as if he himself were a part of the fresh, violent disturbance of the night. Imogene was gone, washed out like the day's dust on the sidewalk. Her beauty would come back into his mind in brighter weather, but here in the storm he was alone with himself. A sense of extraordinary power welled up in him, until to leave the ground permanently with one of his wild leaps would not have surprised him. He was a lone wolf, secret and untamed; a night prowler, demoniac and free. Only when he reached his own house did his emotion begin to turn, speculatively and almost without passion, against Hubert Blair.

He changed his clothes, and putting on pajamas and dressing gown descended to the kitchen, where he happened upon a new chocolate cake. He ate a fourth of it and drank most of a bottle of milk. His elation somewhat diminished, he called up Riply Buckner on the phone.

"I've got a scheme," he said.

"What about?"

"How to do something to H. B. with the S. D."

Riply understood immediately what he meant. Hubert had been so indiscreet as to fascinate other girls besides Miss Bissel that evening.

"We'll have to take in Bill Kampf," Basil said.

"All right."

"See you at recess tomorrow . . . Goodnight!"

### IV

Four days later, when Mr. and Mrs. George P. Blair were finishing dinner, Hubert was called to the telephone. Mrs. Blair took advantage of his absence to speak to her husband of what had been on her mind all day.

"George, those boys, or whatever they are, came again last night."

He frowned.

"Did you see them?"

"Hilda did. She almost caught one of them. You see, I told her about the note they left last Tuesday, the one that said, 'First warning, S. D.,' so she was ready for them. They rang the back-door bell this time and she answered it straight from the dishes. If her hands hadn't been soapy she could have caught one, because she grabbed him when he handed her a note, but her hands were soapy so he slipped away."

"What did he look like?"

"She said he might have been a very little man, but she thought he was a boy in a false face. He dodged like a boy, she said, and she thought he had short pants on. The note was like the other. It said 'Second warning, S. D.'"

"If you've got it, I'd like to see it after dinner."

Hubert came back from the phone. "It was Imogene Bissel," he said. "She wants me to come over to her house. A bunch are going over there tonight."

"Hubert," asked his father, "do you know any boy with the initials S. D.?"

"No, sir."

"Have you thought?"

"Yeah, I thought. I knew a boy named Sam Davis, but I haven't seen him for a year."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, a sort of tough. He was at Number 44 School when I went there."

"Did he have it in for you?"

"I don't think so."

"Who do you think could be doing this? Has anybody got it in for you that you know about?"

"I don't know, Papa; I don't think so."

"I don't like the looks of this thing," said Mr. Blair thoughtfully. "Of course it may be only some boys, but it may be—"

He was silent. Later, he studied the note. It was in red ink and there was a skull and crossbones in the corner, but being printed, it told him nothing at all.

Meanwhile Hubert kissed his mother, set his cap jauntily on the side of his head, and passing through the kitchen stepped out on the back stoop, intending to take the usual shortcut along the alley. It was a bright moonlit night and he paused for a moment on the stoop to tie his shoe. If he had but known that the telephone call

just received had been a decoy, that it had not come from Imogene Bissel's house, had not indeed been a girl's voice at all, and that shadowy and grotesque forms were skulking in the alley just outside the gate, he would not have sprung so gracefully and lithely down the steps with his hands in his pockets or whistled the first bar of the Grizzly Bear into the apparently friendly night.

His whistle aroused varying emotions in the alley. Basil had given his daring and successful falsetto imitation over the telephone a little too soon, and though the Scandal Detectives had hurried, their preparations were not quite in order. They had become separated. Basil, got up like a Southern planter of the old persuasion, just outside the Blairs' gate; Bill Kampf, with a long Balkan mustache attached by a wire to the lower cartilage of his nose, was approaching in the shadow of the fence; but Riply Buckner, in a full rabbinical beard, was impeded by a length of rope he was trying to coil and was still a hundred feet away. The rope was an essential part of their plan; for, after much cogitation, they had decided what they were going to do to Hubert Blair. They were going to tie him up, gag him, and put him in his own garbage can.

The idea at first horrified them—it would ruin his suit, it was awfully dirty and he might smother. In fact the garbage can, symbol of all that was repulsive, won the day only because it made every other idea seem tame. They disposed of the objections—his suit could be cleaned, it was where he ought to be anyhow, and if they left the lid off he couldn't smother. To be sure of this they had paid a visit of inspection to the Buckners' garbage can and stared into it, fascinated, envisaging Hubert among the rinds and eggshells. Then two of them, at least, resolutely put that part out of their minds and concentrated upon the luring of him into the alley and the overwhelming of him there.

Hubert's cheerful whistle caught them off guard and each of the three stood stockstill, unable to communicate with the others. It flashed through Basil's mind that if he grabbed Hubert without Riply at hand to apply the gag as had been arranged, Hubert's cries might alarm that gigantic cook in the kitchen who had almost taken him the night before. The thought threw him into a state of indecision. At that precise moment Hubert opened the gate and came out into the alley.

The two stood five feet apart, staring at each other, and all at once Basil made a startling discovery. He discovered he liked Hubert Blair—liked him as well as any boy he knew. He had abso-

lutely no wish to lay hands on Hubert Blair and stuff him into a garbage can, jaunty cap and all. He would have fought to prevent that contingency. As his mind, unstrung by his situation, gave pasture to this inconvenient thought, he turned and dashed out of the alley and up the street.

For a moment the apparition had startled Hubert, but when it turned and made off he was heartened and gave chase. Outdistanced, he decided after fifty yards to let well enough alone; and returning to the alley, started rather precipitously down toward the other end—and came face to face with another small and hairy stranger.

Bill Kampf, being more simply organized than Basil, had no scruples of any kind. It had been decided to put Hubert into a garbage can, and though he had nothing at all against Hubert, the idea had made a pattern on his brain which he intended to follow. He was a natural man—that is to say, a hunter—and once a creature took on the aspect of a quarry, he would pursue it without qualms until it stopped struggling.

But he had been witness to Basil's inexplicable flight, and supposing that Hubert's father had appeared and was now directly behind him, he, too, faced about and made off down the alley. Presently he met Riply Buckner, who, without waiting to inquire the cause of his flight, enthusiastically joined him. Again Hubert was surprised into pursuing a little way. Then, deciding once and for all to let well enough alone, he returned on a dead run to his house.

Meanwhile Basil had discovered that he was not pursued, and, keeping in the shadows, made his way back to the alley. He was not frightened—he had simply been incapable of action. The alley was empty; neither Bill nor Riply was in sight. He saw Mr. Blair come to the back gate, open it, look up and down and go back into the house. He came closer. There was a great chatter in the kitchen—Hubert's voice, loud and boastful, and Mrs. Blair's frightened, and the two Swedish domestics contributing bursts of hilarious laughter. Then through an open window he heard Mr. Blair's voice at the telephone:

"I want to speak to the chief of police . . . Chief, this is George P. Blair . . . Chief, there's a gang of toughs around here who—"

Basil was off like a flash, tearing at his Confederate whiskers as he ran.

\* \* \*



## V

Imogene Bissel, having just turned thirteen, was not accustomed to having callers at night. She was spending a bored and solitary evening inspecting the month's bills which were scattered over her mother's desk when she heard Hubert Blair and his father admitted into the front hall.

"I just thought I'd bring him over myself," Mr. Blair was saying to her mother. "There seems to be a gang of toughs hanging around our alley tonight."

Mrs. Bissel had not called upon Mrs. Blair and she was considerably taken aback by this unexpected visit. She even entertained the uncharitable thought that this was a crude overture, undertaken by Mr. Blair on behalf of his wife.

"Really!" she exclaimed. "Imogene will be delighted to see Hubert, I'm sure . . . Imogene!"

"These toughs were evidently lying in wait for Hubert," continued Mr. Blair. "But he's a pretty spunky boy and he managed to drive them away. However, I didn't want him to come down here alone."

"Of course not," she agreed. But she was unable to imagine why Hubert should have come at all. He was a nice enough boy, but surely Imogene had seen enough of him the last three afternoons. In fact, Mrs. Bissel was annoyed, and there was a minimum of warmth in her voice when she asked Mr. Blair to come in.

They were still in the hall, and Mr. Blair was just beginning to perceive that all was not as it should be, when there was another ring at the bell. Upon the door's being opened, Basil Lee, redfaced and breathless, stood on the threshold.

"How do you do, Mrs. Bissel? Hello, Imogene!" he cried in an unnecessarily hearty voice. "Where's the party?"

The salutation might have sounded to a dispassionate observer somewhat harsh and unnatural, but it fell upon the ears of an already disconcerted group.

"There isn't any party," said Imogene wonderingly.

"What?" Basil's mouth dropped open in exaggerated horror, his voice trembled slightly. "You mean to say you didn't call me up and tell me to come over here to a party?"

"Why, of course not, Basil!"

Imogene was excited by Hubert's unexpected arrival and it occurred to her that Basil had invented this excuse to spoil it. Alone of those present, she was close to the truth; but she underestimated

the urgency of Basil's motive, which was not jealousy but mortal fear.

"You called *me* up, didn't you, Imogene?" demanded Hubert confidently.

"Why, no, Hubert! I didn't call up anybody."

Amid a chorus of bewildered protestations, there was another ring at the doorbell and the pregnant night yielded up Riply Buckner, Jr., and William S. Kampf. Like Basil, they were somewhat rumpled and breathless, and they no less rudely and peremptorily demanded the whereabouts of the party, insisting with curious vehemence that Imogene had just now invited them over the phone.

Hubert laughed, the others began to laugh, and the tensity relaxed. Imogene, because she believed Hubert, now began to believe them all. Unable to restrain himself any longer in the presence of this unhopd-for audience, Hubert burst out with his amazing adventure.

"I guess there's a gang laying for us all!" he exclaimed. "There were some guys laying for me in our alley when I went out. There was a big fellow with gray whiskers, but when he saw me he ran away. Then I went along the alley and there was a bunch more, sort of foreigners or something, and I started after'm and they ran. I tried to catchem, but I guess they were good and scared, because they ran too fast for *me*."

So interested were Hubert and his father in the story that they failed to perceive that three of his listeners were growing purple in the face or to mark the uproarious laughter that greeted Mrs. Bissel's polite proposal that they have a party, after all.

"Tell about the warning, Hubert," prompted Mr. Blair. "You see, Hubert had received these warnings. Did you boys get any warnings?"

"I did," said Basil suddenly. "I got a sort of warning on a piece of paper about a week ago."

For a moment, as Mr. Blair's worried eye fell upon Basil, a strong sense not precisely of suspicion but rather of obscure misgiving passed over him. Possibly that odd aspect of Basil's eyebrows, where wisps of crêpe hair still lingered, connected itself in his subconscious mind with what was bizarre in the events of the evening. He shook his head somewhat puzzled. Then his thoughts glided back restfully to Hubert's courage and presence of mind.

Hubert, meanwhile, having exhausted his facts, was making tentative leaps into the realms of imagination.

"I said, 'So, you're the guy that's been sending these warnings,'

and he swung his left at me, and I dodged and swung my right back at him. I guess I must have landed, because he gave a yell and ran. Gosh, he could run! You'd ought to of seen him, Bill—he could run as fast as you."

"Was he big?" asked Basil, blowing his nose noisily.

"Sure! About as big as Father."

"Were the other ones big too?"

"Sure! They were pretty big. I didn't wait to see. I just yelled, 'You get out of here, you bunch of toughs, or I'll show you!' They started to sort of fight, but I swung my right at one of them and they didn't wait for any more."

"Hubert says he thinks they were Italians," interrupted Mr. Blair. "Didn't you, Hubert?"

"They were sort of funny-looking," Hubert said. "One fellow looked like an Italian."

Mrs. Bissel led the way to the dining room, where she had caused a cake and grape juice supper to be spread. Imogene took a chair by Hubert's side.

"Now tell me all about it, Hubert," she said, attentively folding her hands.

Hubert ran over the adventure once more. A knife now made its appearance in the belt of one conspirator; Hubert's parleys with them lengthened and grew in volume and virulence. He had told them just what they might expect if they fooled with him. They had started to draw knives, but had thought better of it and taken to flight.

In the middle of this recital there was a curious snorting sound from across the table, but when Imogene looked over, Basil was spreading jelly on a piece of coffee cake and his eyes were brightly innocent. A minute later, however, the sound was repeated, and this time she intercepted a specifically malicious expression upon his face.

"I wonder what you'd have done, Basil," she said cuttingly. "I'll bet you'd be running yet!"

Basil put the piece of coffee cake in his mouth and immediately choked on it—an accident which Bill Kampf and Riply Buckner found hilariously amusing. Their amusement at various casual incidents at table seemed to increase as Hubert's story continued. The alley now swarmed with malefactors, and as Hubert struggled on against overwhelming odds, Imogene found herself growing restless—without in the least realizing that the tale was boring her.

On the contrary, each time Hubert recollected new incidents and began again, she looked spitefully over at Basil, and her dislike for him grew.

When they moved into the library, Imogene went to the piano, where she sat alone while the boys gathered around Hubert on the couch. To her chagrin, they seemed quite content to listen indefinitely. Odd little noises squeaked out of them from time to time, but whenever the narrative slackened they would beg for more.

"Go on, Hubert. Which one did you say could run as fast as Bill Kampf?"

She was glad when, after half an hour, they all got up to go.

"It's a strange affair from beginning to end," Mr. Blair was saying. "I don't like it. I'm going to have a detective look into the matter tomorrow. What did they want of Hubert? What were they going to do to him?"

No one offered a suggestion. Even Hubert was silent, contemplating his possible fate with certain respectful awe. During breaks in his narration the talk had turned to such collateral matters as murders and ghosts, and all the boys had talked themselves into a state of considerable panic. In fact each had come to believe, in varying degrees, that a band of kidnappers infested the vicinity.

"I don't like it," repeated Mr. Blair. "In fact I'm going to see all of you boys to your own homes."

Basil greeted this offer with relief. The evening had been a mad success, but furies once aroused sometimes get out of hand. He did not feel like walking the streets alone tonight.

In the hall, Imogene, taking advantage of her mother's somewhat fatigued farewell to Mr. Blair, beckoned Hubert back into the library. Instantly attuned to adversity, Basil listened. There was a whisper and a short scuffle, followed by an indiscreet but unmistakable sound. With the corners of his mouth falling, Basil went out the door. He had stacked the cards dexterously; but Life had played a trump from its sleeve at the last.

A moment later they all started off, clinging together in a group, turning corners with cautious glances behind and ahead. What Basil and Riply and Bill expected to see as they peered warily into the sinister mouths of alleys and around great dark trees and behind concealing fences they did not know—in all probability the same hairy and grotesque desperadoes who had lain in wait for Hubert Blair that night.

\* \* \*

## VI

A week later Basil and Riply heard that Hubert and his mother had gone to the seashore for the summer. Basil was sorry. He had wanted to learn from Hubert some of the graceful mannerisms that his contemporaries found so dazzling and that might come in so handy next fall when he went away to school. In tribute to Hubert's passing, he practiced leaning against a tree and missing it and rolling a skate down his arm, and he wore his cap in Hubert's manner, set jauntily on the side of his head.

This was only for a while. He perceived eventually that though boys and girls would always listen to him while he talked, their mouths literally moving in response to his, they would never look at him as they had looked at Hubert. So he abandoned the loud chuckle that so annoyed his mother and set his cap straight upon his head once more.

But the change in him went deeper than that. He was no longer sure that he wanted to be a gentleman burglar, though he still read of their exploits with breathless admiration. Outside of Hubert's gate, he had for a moment felt morally alone; and he realized that whatever combinations he might make of the materials of life would have to be safely within the law. And after another week he found that he no longer grieved over losing Imogene. Meeting her, he saw only the familiar little girl he had always known. The ecstatic moment of that afternoon had been a premature birth, an emotion left over from an already fleeting spring.

He did not know that he had frightened Mrs. Blair out of town and that because of him a special policeman walked a placid beat for many a night. All he knew was the vague and restless yearnings of three long spring months were somehow satisfied. They reached combustion in that last week—flared up, exploded and burned out. His face was turned without regret toward the boundless possibilities of summer.

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**SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":**

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# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Sheila Smith

**H**askell Blevins is a P.I. in Pigeon Fork, Kentucky. He doesn't have much in the way of business and supports himself by mopping the floor of his brother Elmo's drugstore. But one fine autumn day Cordelia Turley comes into Haskell's office to hire him. She wants him to find out who murdered her grandmother and Grammy's pets, Percival (a cat) and Sweetie-bird (a parakeet). It seems that all three were killed more than seven months earlier, but the police have made no progress on the case. **Pet Peeves** by Taylor McCafferty (Pocket, \$3.50, 216 pp) introduces us to Cordelia's sister Eunice and her husband Joe Eddy, and Emmaline Johnstone, who has been writing letters to the editor complaining about how Grammy, Percival, and Sweetie-bird should have had a joint funeral. And then there is Rip, Haskell's half-shepherd, half-unknown dog who only barks at Haskell and who is terrified of stairs; Haskell has to carry all fifty pounds of him up and down the stairs of his porch in order to walk him each and every day.\*

**A Cat in the Manger** by Lydia Adamson (Signet, \$3.95, 208 pp) introduces Alice Nestleton and her cats, Bushy, the Maine coon, and Pancho, the paranoid stray, to murder and mayhem in the countryside of Long Island. Alice and her entourage are used to spending the Christmas holidays at the Starobins', cat-sitting for their eight Himalayans. On her arrival this year, she finds Harry

\*Several Taylor McCafferty short stories set in Pigeon Fork have appeared in AHMM in recent years.—ED.

dead and Jo unwilling to take their usual trip to Virginia. When a nearby neighbor is also murdered, Alice is drawn into investigating Harry's past by Jo, who is uncertain about whether she really wants to know *why* Harry was murdered.

Perhaps no other author is so linked with animals as Dick Francis and his horses, and **Longshot** (Putnam, \$19.95, 320 pp), Francis's *thirtieth* novel, only cements that link. But unlike other Francis books, this comes close to being a British "cosy." The hero, John Kendall, is a self-sufficient loner, a writer of survival guides who has decided to turn to fiction. But starving was not what he had in mind; when he is offered, somewhat off-handedly, the chance to write the biography of a horse trainer, he jumps at the chance. Little does John know how involved he will become with Tremayne and his family and friends, with the discovery of a murdered stable lad (a female one), and with the murderous jealousy of an amateur jockey when John shows talents others in the close-knit family don't have. The evil and violence usually associated with the villains in a Francis book are lacking here. What is lurking in the background of the peaceful Reading countryside is sadness, insecurity, and oppression—all equally good motives for murder under the circumstances. A notable addition to the Francis lexicon.

J. S. Borthwick has returned with English professor Sarah Deane and her Scottish boyfriend, physician Alex McKenzie, in **Bodies of Water** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 287 pp). They are doing her family a favor by accepting an invitation to sail with a wealthy Floridian aboard a yacht that is "doing" the waters of Maine. Sarah's ne'er-do-well brother is on board, and the family would like a report. Besides, this is a chance for Alex to visit, get in some birdwatching, and sightsee along the Maine coast. Alex and Sarah discover a body on a deserted section of coast, however, and Sarah becomes thoroughly involved in the investigation.

The sequel to *Trace Elements*—**Mortal Words** by Kathryn Lasky Knight (Summit, \$17.95, 316 pp)—has children's book author/artist Calista Jacobs and her son Charley tracking down a person who is harassing several authors because their books seem "to be a part of an increasing trend. . . . A trend toward secular humanism." When one of the authors is murdered, Calista and Charley take off on their own to investigate the members of the Lorne Thurston sect, with Charley masquerading as a possible applicant to the College of Christian Heritage. More murders and attempted murders occur along the way, endangering them both, until they finally solve the mystery of who hates these children's books and authors.



Marcia Muller's Sharyn McCone becomes involved in the lives of a number of sixties radicals when she is asked by her boss Harry to investigate the holographic will of a friend. The will, strangely, disinherits the dead man's children and leaves his entire estate to four unknown people. **Trophies and Dead Things** (Mysterious Press, \$16.95, 166 pp) is the eleventh in the Sharyn McCone series, an entry that finally has Sharyn coming to terms with her life, the loss of her beloved cat Watley, and the possibility that her lover will not return from caring for his mentally ill wife. Nicely written.

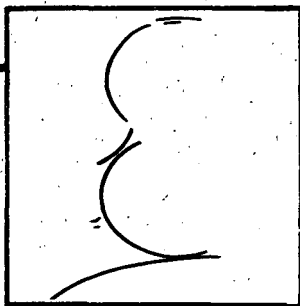
Robert Parker is back with his latest Spenser offering—**Stardust** (Putnam, \$18.95, 256 pp)—in which Spenser is hired to guard the star of a television series being filmed in Boston. The actress, a self-centered, arrogant, and beautiful product of the Hollywood star system, is being harassed with threatening telephone calls, notes, and practical “jokes.” This harassment is ruining the lady's acting and sending her more and more often to various alcoholic and narcotic supports. Naturally, Spenser and Susan and Hawk become involved with the star and try to help her find her way out of the substance abuse that is controlling her. This one reads more like the early books in the series; however, the serious, introspective side of Spenser that surfaced in later years is still there.

Philip Kerr's **The Pale Criminal** (Viking Penguin, \$18.95, 274 pp) is the second in a series featuring private investigator Bernhard Gunther in pre-World War II Berlin. Bernie is not a Nazi—that is why he quit working for the Kripo. But now there is a serial murderer terrorizing Berlin's young girls. The upper echelons of the Nazi government are uncertain how to handle this case, so they turn to Bernie and coerce him back into the Kripo for this case only. Bernie agrees on the condition that he be allowed to solve the murder of his partner. The seamy, dark side of 1930's Berlin is the primary setting of this classic hardboiled tale.

Tom Bethany is a Vietnam vet, an Olympic-class wrestler, and an ex-CIA agent with experience in Laos. He also worked for a presidential campaign four years ago, as a security agent. His office is the diner on Harvard Square in Cambridge and he keeps several bank accounts and an unlisted telephone in aliases. Tom is hired to “vet” a candidate for Secretary of State for the as yet unannounced Democratic candidate for president. He agrees to do this even though there is no love lost between him and the people who hired him. **Body Scissors** (Pocket Books Hardcover, \$17.95, 122 pp) is Jerome Doolittle's first mystery, but I suspect it will not be his last.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**T**he *Russia House* is a star-packed screen adaptation of John le Carré's spy thriller set in the waning days of the Cold War. But even with Sean Connery, Michelle Pfeiffer, and an abundance of magnificent Soviet scenery, it doesn't pack many thrills.

Pfeiffer, whose Russian accent may make Meryl Streep sit up and take notice, plays Katya, a go-between for a Russian scientist turned author who wants to pass his manuscript containing Soviet military secrets to a British publisher. Connery is that publisher—Barley Blair—a rumpled bear of a man who has his own ideas about peaceful coexistence and who is very much an individualist.

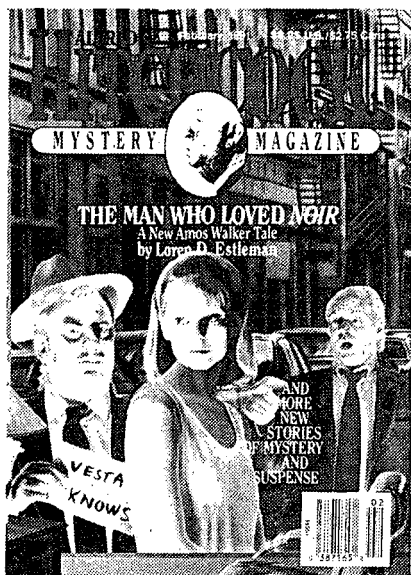
Before Barley can get a look at the manuscript, it falls into the hands of British intelli-

gence. A bewildered Barley is brought in for questioning about the author, who uses the pseudonym Dante.

He initially declines to help out. Eventually, although reluctantly, he agrees. This is a particularly vexing aspect of the story, as no real pressure was put on Barley to cooperate. In this would-be thriller the protagonist is not physically tortured. His loved ones aren't held hostage. He's not even subjected to diabolical mind games by experienced spies.

Dante, it turns out, had chosen Barley as his Western publisher because he liked some things he said when they met briefly at a Soviet writers' retreat some months earlier.

The two have similar attitudes about ending the arms race. Dante, with the publication of his book, hopes to prove



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Soviet military might second rate, allowing the West to cut back its own weapons programs.

The trouble with this theory is that in today's world it comes as no surprise that the Soviet military capability has been exaggerated. And but for problems in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. and its allies would already have cut military outlays because of the end of the Cold War.

Anyway, it becomes Barley's job to contact Dante once again and to submit a laundry list of questions concerning the Soviet military, using the pretty Katya, a divorced mother of two. Although Katya tries to keep her emotional distance, love manages to become an issue.

Michelle Pfeiffer, it seems, can do no wrong on a movie screen these days. Although her role is fairly insubstantial, she makes the most of it, showing vulnerability and courage.

Sean Connery brings some comic wit, reminiscent of his 007 days, to the role. But if you're choosing between this spy flick and a classic Bond picture, take Connery's earlier

work. In contrast with Pfeiffer's believable Russian accent, Connery sounds as if he's deliberately altered his normal speaking voice—for the worse.

Klaus Maria Brandauer, as Dante, offers a hard edge to his thoughtful, but intense, character.

An amusing sideline to the main story is the struggle for control of the case between British intelligence and the American C.I.A. Roy Scheider is quite funny as the C.I.A. official who, like the stereotypical American, takes over the operation. Ken Russell, complete with a shock of white hair and a red velvet vest, is also amusing as his British counterpart. But inexplicably he's taken off the case and disappears.

A positive nod must be given to Ian Baker, the film's director of photography, for his beautifully shot scenes in Moscow and Leningrad, and of the sweeping countryside that unfolds during a train ride between the two. Russia, we learn in this film, is a land of grand monuments. But *The Russia House* is no more compelling than a house of cards.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious Photo-  
E. Pariseau of Owosso, Michigan.  
phen Nicholson of East Harwich,  
Fairfax, Virginia; Judith A. Adel-  
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Canyon Lake, California; and Shelley M. King of Hinkley, California.

graph contest was won by Perry  
Honorable mentions go to Ste-  
Massachusetts; Art Cosing of  
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R. Stewart of Oakland, Califor-  
nia; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada; Terry E. Lutwen of  
Canyon Lake, California; and Shelley M. King of Hinkley, California.

Photo by Brian N. Cox

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## WHEN IN ROME . . . by Perry E. Pariseau

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Fellow gods and goddesses, I come to you tonight with a warning! We're in the midst of changing times. Our powers and reputations, and God only knows what other freebies are on the line!

Something is happening in our ol' Roman Empire these days, and it's undermining our authority. It's this new mortal majority group. They're pushing for less crime, orgy boycotts, and they're even demanding punishment for anyone who doesn't go along—us included!

You there, Mars! You're gonna have to start getting along better with others—make love, not war!

And you, Venus! Make a little less love!

Yo, Mercury! Slow down a little at some of those stellar inter-sections. You've been clocked going at lightning speeds with those wing-tips!

These people are serious, guys; and they're better organized than they were back in the Ages of Dark.

I know whereof I speak. Can you believe it? Me, the great Neptune, god of the seas, just out fishin' for a little relaxation, hauled into court on a charge of bein' a couple of multitudes over my limit!

Not a big crime, you say? HAH! They're really crackin' down. No measly fine or a slap on the almighty wrist for this god. I'm tellin' everyone here, if things keep goin' the way they are, you're all gonna end up like me—busted!

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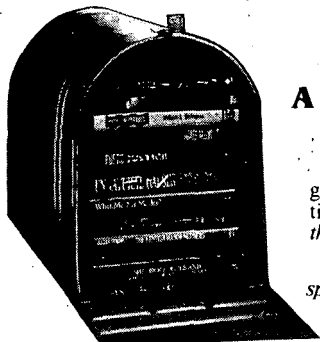
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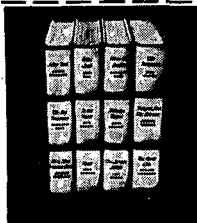
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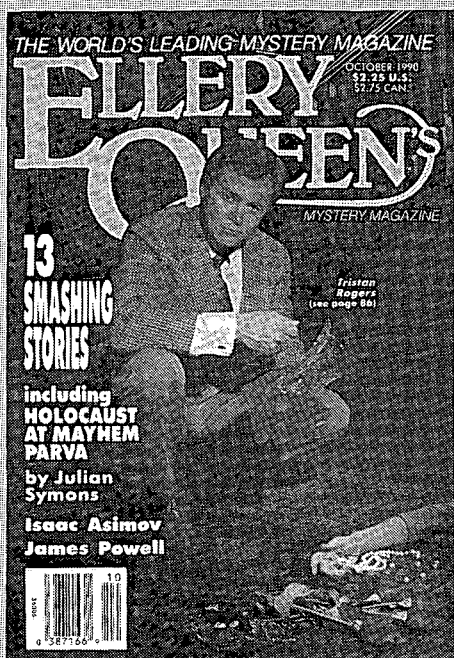
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